YELLOW BOOTS

a novel by

Vera Lysenko

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Author's Foreword

IN THE YEAR 1929, when this story begins, the Ukrainian immigrant settlers who were still pioneering on the Canadian prairie wilderness had not yet lost their power to create a song. Among them there grew up a girl who was moved by the earth and skies to express in song that kinship between man and nature which still exists among peasant people. Living by rites long established, in an isolated community, her ear was tuned to the rhythms of those who broke the land, who built the railroads, and fashioned life for a coming generation. Over the years, her people learned to conform, to yield much of their peasant tradition, since there was so little they could interpose against the robot uniformity of industrialization – only a few symbols of an outmoded life, a carved chest, a folk song, a pair of yellow boots. The old song-makers were dying, the hands that once wove tapestries now tended machines, the treasures of folk lore were forgotten. For all those whose forefathers suffered the anguish which the immigrant must endure when he is called on to surrender his ancestral rites, this story of a girl's search for music is offered as a reminder of their lost inheritance, and to preserve for them something of the old beauty.

PART ONE
Rites of Spring

1
THE DEATH RIDERS

THE MOTION of the jigger upon the steel track drummed into the consciousness of the sick girl as she struggled to arrange into some pattern of comprehension the brightness of the skies and the rushing prairie. Where was she going? How did she get here? Who were these men? She heard a voice above her, alien in accent:

"You've been travelling a rough road, young one."

A big, whiskery hand groped about to make sure the blanket was anchored fast about the girl's shoulders. In that livid face, the dark eyes blinked, wary, fearful, as the girl stared back at the Irish countenance of Mike O'Donovan, the section foreman. Only a tremor of the nostril indicated that she had heard his words.

"I wonder if she'll last the journey?"

In the quiet of the spring afternoon, the put-put-put of the track motorcar on which the two men and the girl were travelling across the Manitoba countryside sounded like an outboard motor, and the land appeared like the sea, stretching out in every direction to the curved horizon. The jigger seemed to be floating like a toy on top of an immense plate. Only the rails, which stretched like two silver ribbons to the great northern lakes, gave any sense of direction.

Mike's companion, Ian MacTavish, who had recently arrived from Ontario to teach school in the district, turned his head back from the front seat, where he sat driving the jigger. "She looks more like a wild animal than a child," he said,

staring curiously at the girl.

She shut her eyes and she was back once again in the swamp country, hearing the bellowing of cattle, the barking of the dog and the screech of the wind as it tore the leaves from the trees. In the distance she could hear the howling of wolves. Desperately she looked about and could recognize no feature of the landscape in the growing twilight. She was lost! Perspiration oozed down her face in fat drops.

As he observed with consternation the sweat upon the girl's skin, the teacher inquired, "Think she has any chance?"

"Hm?" The old section foreman murmured absently. He had been looking out over the prairie, where the coming of spring had caused a great stirring. Wisps of smoke arose from tree stumps cleared; occasionally they saw the flicker of a scarlet shawl and striped skirt as some woman moved before the whitewashed cottage of a homestead; or a solitary man in sheepskin coat emerged suddenly from the shadow of a poplar bluff. At this hour of late afternoon, the air was suffused with particles of gold, giving a luminous quality to the landscape. Over it all, the song of the meadowlark rang like a constant, recurring chime.

"Think she has any chance?" the teacher repeated.

"Not much, I'm afraid," replied the section hand with regret. "She's a game youngster. It's a pity."

"Whose girl is she? Why is she being moved?"

The old man's eyes returned to the girl in his arms. "She belongs to Anton Landash, about fifteen miles down the line. Quite a ride for a girl close to death. They had her working at her uncle's before she took ill."

'Working? A girl of that age? She can't be more than nine." MacTavish contrasted the feeble child with the man who held her. Like a discus-thrower, the shoulders of the old railroader were muscle-padded from heaving the spike maul on the extra gangs. His face, burned brick red through decades of prairie summers, and his eyes, like two chips of prairie sky,

gave him an appearance as elemental as the land over which they were passing.

"More likely eleven,' said the Irishman. 'Small for her age. It's hard to tell about some of these immigrants' children. They don't always keep a record of births. Look at these hands." Mike held up one of the hands which had slipped from beneath the cover, and MacTavish turned his head to see. "More like a labourer's than a girl's." The hands, calloused and with joints abnormally enlarged, were long for a child, with veins bulging out like scars. "The land can't wait for them to grow up. It takes away their childhood. Riding up and down this line, on these homesteads I've seen young girls doing tasks grown men would do among us."

Within the mind of the sick girl, the terror was increasing. The spring floods had obliterated the roads, so that she had lost her bearings while driving the cows home. It was then she had seen it – a light like a hand holding a lantern, coming from the direction of the swamp. What was it the old folks said about swamp fires? "They're the spirits of people who've committed a terrible crime, and if you've sinned, the light will follow you." The light was following her now, almost directly overhead. She stood paralyzed for a moment, then screamed and ran . . .

Meanwhile, the old section-boss was scrutinizing the profile of the man in the front seat. Seen thus, the teacher's face had a fox-like appearance, with its brush of sandy hair, sharp nose and greenish-grey eyes. A rough tweed jacket was draped carelessly over his shoulders. "He's a likely one," thought the railway man. "Tough – he won't balk at wild conditions."

MacTavish felt exhilarated at his novel experience. "You know," he said, indicating the track motorcar. "I've never been on one of these things before." He felt grateful that a chance encounter on the road with the old section-hand had led to this unpremeditated ride.

"It's a good way of getting acquainted with the land and the people," replied Mike from his back seat. "Especially if you've an eye to the country."

"Do you often carry passengers?"

"Sometimes, when it's not possible to reach a place by ordinary means. The train goes through here only twice a week."

He stopped talking in order to wave to two children standing by the track. As soon as they recognized the jigging sound of the track motorcar, they came running from the fields to wave to the men, "Jigger's comin' down the track!" The section-men were a race apart to the children of the Canadian prairies. Detached from the earth, they sped across the land, appearing without notice and vanishing without trace. Where *did they come from? Where did they go? Bending in alternate* rhythm, they appeared to execute a dance as they pumped the lever up and down to propel the hand-car.

"Wonder what's going on in her mind," said Mike as he passed his hand over the girl's feverish face. "She seems to be having a nightmare."

As the girl ran from the swamp fire, her bare feet splashing against the wet grass, the noise was echoed by the humming in her ears and the thudding of her heart. Feet torn by the stones over which she ran, she tripped and fell headlong into a pool of water. Much later, drenched to the skin and spattered with mud from head to foot, she had finally stumbled into the home of her aunt and had fallen unconscious upon the floor.

Her irregular breath alarmed Mike and he bent over her. "I think the ride is disturbing her," he said. "Rough for a sick one."

The girl in his arms stirred and opened her eyes. "How do you feel, pee wee?"

She was silent. Her eyes were clouded, as though she had not adjusted herself to her surroundings. Mike repeated the question, "How do you feel?"

The girl spoke for the first time. Her voice was low and husky, with a tremolo which might have been caused by weakness. "I all right. I fine."

The teacher commented: "What a fierce, independent little person! She looks at us at though to say that she doesn't expect anything from us."

"Yes," agreed Mike. "That's how her people are – proud, not asking for help though they were thrown on this wilderness and left to shift as best they might." He addressed himself again to the girl: "What's your name, young one?"

She did not answer. "Can't speak English very well," said Mike. "Not likely she's had much schooling. You'll find other kids wild as this one in your classes. The last teacher left because she couldn't stick it out to the end of the term."

"I'm not likely to run away,' said MacTavish, his eyes narrowing with scorn, then, in a sudden change of mood, "You know, I feel close to the earth here." As he crouched upon the jigger, he tried to absorb the vastness about him.

"Well, there's nothing to interrupt your view," said Mike. "Railroaders say this is the flattest roadbed in the world, so you won't feel cramped here. As for your pupils – " he shrugged. "You'll be digging where nobody's dug before."

As the girl's eyes met Mike's, he smiled at her, and she consented to release a tentative smile, as though her smile muscles were unaccustomed to use. "You look like real man," she said in wonder.

"Yes," said Mike. "Here, pinch me." He took her thumb and forefinger and pinched his cheek. "Oi!" he exclaimed as if in pain. A smile flickered on the girl's face. "She doesn't think I'm quite human," said Mike. "No wonder. Perhaps she feels there's something strange about this trip. Strange for me, too. It's the first time I've been riding a jigger with death breathing down my back, and I don't like it." He was developing an affection for the girl. How long, in his wandering life of a railroader, since he had held a child in his arms!

The teacher turned his head back now with a quizzical expression, for he was getting to like the old railroader, and wanted to know more of his history.

His name for one thing sounded a little too apt to be likely, for anyone who looked more like a Mike O'Donovan than the section foreman, MacTavish had never seen. He put the query, therefore:

"Is your name really O'Donovan?"

"Yes, really," chuckled Mike. "Why, don't I look like an O'Donovan?"

"Too much so," replied MacTavish. "It sounds as if you had made it up to suit your face, which certainly looks like the map of Ireland. People don't always have names that fit them so exactly."

"Maybe so," admitted the section-foreman comfortably. "But I think you'll find they ease into them as people ease into a tight-fitting pair of boots."

Another point had been puzzling the teacher: although he was not so naive as to imagine that an Irish section foreman must necessarily talk like a stage Irishman, he was curious to know how such a man had come to his present status in life, and so he asked, "You sound like an educated man. How is that?"

"How is it I'm working on the section-gang?" Mike O'Donovan grinned as though he had heard the question before, many times. "Well," he drawled, "you'll find all sorts on the gangs – scholars, tramps, criminals, saints – I met a chap once who claimed he was the son of an English lord. The roving life gets in your blood. I suppose you'd say, some people are born to be wanderers – It's a way of life."

While speaking, he did not notice the expression on the face of the girl in his arms, and if he had, he might not have understood it, for how could he know that she, too, was a wanderer?

Now the fluty tremolo of the meadowlark sounded again,

from all directions seemingly, so that it was difficult to spot him. "They seem to be all over the prairie," said the teacher, his eyes darting from side to side, trying to locate the bird.

"Meadowlark on fence post," whispered the girl, her eyes indicating the position of the songster.

"Why, so it is!" exclaimed Mike, giving a quick nod in the direction of the yellow-breasted bird. "Imagine her noticing that, in her condition!" He asked, solicitously, "Tired, little one?"

The girl closed her eyes, then opened them again, as a sign of assent.

"We'll have you to your father's soon."

MacTavish was startled by the expression of fear which passed over the girl's face at the mention of her father, and inquired, "What kind of man is her father?"

"Landash? He's a fierce dreamer," replied Mike, trying to recall the many odd stories he had heard about Landash, and to piece them into a composite picture of the man. "A fanatic, some call him, because he has ambitions of becoming a big landowner. He built a log house which is the talk of the district, for it's as big as a barn." Mike looked thoughtfully at the girl, and sensed the tension behind that grave face. "Want to be back at your father's, young one?" He was not surprised when she whispered, "I like you should be fadder."

Tenderness was a new emotion whose existence she knew of by instinct, but had had no personal experience of. She savoured it like a new flavour, disturbing but pleasant. It served as a bulwark against the prospect of meeting again that terrifying figure who was her father, Anton Landash.

How long ago was it since she had seen him – five years? She was six, and even then an independent person, standing against the wall, impassive, while her elders debated her future. "Take that one," said her mother at last to her aunt, a coarse-grained woman far advanced in pregnancy. "She'll help you with the children and cost little to feed as she's small." Her

aunt stuck a toothpick into her mouth and laughed: "At least it won't be hard to find room for her." That day, she had left the big log house of her father and had gone to work for her aunt, until a week ago, when she had fallen ill and had shown signs of becoming a corpse. It was then that her aunt had delivered her to the old section-hand, to be returned, like a parcel of unsatisfactory goods, to her family. If only the journey would last forever, so that she would keep on travelling, that she could remain suspended in space, so to speak, neither returning to her aunt's nor to the home of her father!

Unexpectedly now, on the road which ran parallel to the railway, there appeared a fantastic procession, composed of four or five rough green wagons driven by oxen. These wagons were filled with men in sheepskin coats and women in leather boleros, long coloured skirts and white turbans. They were on their way to a silver-domed church on top of a smooth round hillock.

Mike's companion stared at the scene. The people in their shaggy coats looked as if they had only lately sprung from the earth. "Who are these people?" he exclaimed.

The abrupt emergence of this primitive congregation in the midst of bare Manitoba prairie was like a mirage on the desert, and this resemblance was increased when the tarnished gold stubble was lit by the rays of the sun.

Ha, ha, ha! Like a rubber ball, the sound of their merriment bounced wildly over the flat prairie. Ha, ha, ha! A feeble echo, like a nestling's cheep, resounded from Mike's arms. "Laughing, are you, little one?"

The girl implored him with her eyes. "Want to see them, eh?" She blinked her eyes as he lifted her in his arms.

"They're like something out of a history book," marvelled Ian MacTavish. He might have exclaimed, as an Englishman had years before him, on seeing a similar sight in Alberta, "I have seen it – the very beginning of things!"

"Hi! Hi!" the men called as they snapped their whips, the final "ee" of their call being prolonged like the curling of a whip. The sound intrigued the teacher. "Hai, hai!" he called back, but his voice sounded thin in comparison. Mike took up the call and cracked it out with such sharpness that the people in the wagons applauded. "Hai, hai!" they returned the salute. Mike smiled. "When they first came here," he said, "people among whom they settled liked that call so much they named a town in Saskatchewan after it – Hyas."

Then, without warning, the entire congregation burst into song. The tenor, singing almost in a falsetto, initiated the melody, elaborated upon it, prolonged the piercing note until the whole countryside seemed to express the profound sorrow of a persecuted people. The chanting, in polyphonic harmony, swelled in a crescendo as the soaring voices poured forth their melody. The whole prairie had come to life.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the teacher. He had never heard such spontaneous choral harmony before. "What are they singing? Is it a custom among them, or do they burst into song on any occasion?"

"Do you know," Mike replied, "that's a question I used to put to them myself when I used to hear them sing on the section-gang. They sang often then, ballads, so I thought, of their old country, and when I asked them what they were singing about, they would always reply, "How once we were free."

The two men gazed in silence at the scene, which was like a painting by some primitive artist wielding a huge brush and throwing colour from his palette in a kind of frenzy. Everything was exaggerated – the people, the music, the landscape. An excitement mounted in the hearts of the two men, a feeling that here was a phenomenon of peculiar import, part of the creative processes of life itself. It was difficult to believe that this was the year 1929 in the new world.

Meanwhile, it was extraordinary to see what was

happening to the dying girl. Her features were all alight and there was a glow in her eyes, which were enormous and almond-shaped, with thick lashes fanning out against high cheekbones. The intensity of her feeling communicated itself to the men, even though she was almost inarticulate. "O music lovely, O music lovely!" she gasped, a vein throbbing at her temple.

"Why the pee-wee is trembling," observed Mike. He passed his hand over her face. "She has music in her soul, like her people."

Far down the road, the shrill voice of the tenor, holding the melancholy note with all the strength of his powerful lungs, still yearned with all the nostalgia of a vast and lonely land.

"That's a sickly child to be descended from such robust people," mused his companion, as he recalled the big-bosomed women, full of colour and exuberance, with their glossy hair, their musical voices and free laughter. He could not reconcile the evidences of modern civilization – telephone wires, grain elevators, railways – with the primitive character of the people. Out of what travail had that melancholy song been born? "Where do they come from?" he asked the old section-hand.

Mike searched in his memory for what he could recall of their antecedents and history. "They come from some province of the old Austrian Empire," he began slowly. "Bukovynians, they call themselves. They've been coming into this country for thirty years and more now. I worked with a gang of them in British Columbia, when we were building the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific. They worked like giants – " The railroader paused as he recalled that scene in the Canadian Rockies, with the men of the gang puffing their cigarettes, and laughing in their childlike way.

By this time, the track motorcar had been set in motion, and was chugging down the tracks.

"I wonder what they will become, or their children." MacTavish pulled up his leather glove as he tried to relate the

future of these people to his own mission among them.

Mike considered. "They're still pioneering, when pioneering days are over for most of the other settlers. Do you know, when they first came here, I saw them plough the land as people used to in England in the time of Alfred the Great." He paused as he watched, in the distance, the figure of a young farmer ploughing the land. "But I think they'll get ahead; they've already made their mark on the land."

His companion now turned his head back again to look at the sleeping girl, on whose face the marks of death were only too plain. "You know," he said, "I've never seen the country or the people as I've seen them today, and it's all because of this little girl. The whole land's come to life."

"If you want to see clear," Mike pointed out, "see through the eyes of a child." He was obsessed, too, with the thought that near death, everything was intensified.

The girl was not awake when Mike delivered her to her father. The two men saw him from a distance, standing beside the railway crossing, near his wagon, a cigarette glowing red between his fingers. The jigger slowed down, emitting a series of put-put's as it slid to a halt. Mike got off painfully from his cramped position, taking care not to disturb the girl. He walked slowly to the girl's father, carrying the girl in his arms.

"I am Anton Landash," said the man at the crossing.

"We've brought the little girl to you," said Mike and handed the girl over. The two men exchanged glances, Mike appraisingly, Landash arrogant and resentful at having to claim the wretched child.

His tall, lean figure was accented by an extraordinary black cape. Underneath, he had an embroidered sheepskin bolero and a scarlet kerchief was tied under his cleft chin. In the deepening twilight, Landash resembled more the hero of some mid-European operetta than a Canadian farmer, with his swarthy complexion, aquiline nose and glittering eyes.

"Take good care of the child now," Mike admonished,

experiencing a feeling of deprivation. In the last hour he had established an intimate understanding of the child, and now, in all likelihood, he would never see her again. "Perhaps you might send for a doctor," he suggested.

Landash's lips curled as he looked at the dry little husk in his arms. In that still face, breath was not discernible. "Too late for doctor, I think," he said. "Better to send for priest."

Mike, torn with desire to give dignity, somehow, to the girl's death, stood in the twilight, staring at Landash. He discovered that, despite their outward dissimilarity, there was an inner likeness between father and daughter – the intensity of feeling which both brought to the simplest phrase, the rhythm of their speech, the impression both gave of inner resources not easily exhausted.

Anton watched him with hostile eyes. "You have good ride?" he asked, indicating the track motorcar with some amusement.

"A clear night and a clean track," replied Mike, conscious that what he said was almost like a valedictory for the girl.

After exchanging a few uneasy commonplaces with this harsh, uncompromising man, he reluctantly turned back to the jigger, where MacTavish was waiting.

"A harsh man," he sighed as he set the jigger in motion. "I could hardly bring myself to give the girl over to him." He looked down the long steel track which was paling now in the fading light. "It's hard to believe that fierce little light will go out," he said.

2
THE SHROUD MAKERS

THE EXPECTED guest had not yet arrived. All day long, visitors had been coming and going in the house where the young girl lay, awaiting the approach of death, while the square yellow candles by her bedside sputtered, their fat tears oozing painfully down their sides.

The house steamed with the yeasty smell of baking, to provide a funeral feast for mourners who would come from a distance. A large batch of mushroom dumplings was simmering on the stove, supervised by Granny Yefrosynia, who looked rather like an agaric mushroom herself, in her orange blouse, green calico skirt and white turban with chin strap. Granny loved colours and wore them all together; they suited her unique personality, which, also, was full of colours.

The sick girl wakened from her sleep. She saw people moving about, their bare feet smacking like wet rags against the rammed earth floor. It was early evening, and grotesque shadows cast by the coal-oil lamp pantomimed upon the white-washed walls like a procession of dancers clothed in mourning.

A woman, who must be her mother, with the ancient resignation of the peasant stamped on her face, sat near the bed, sewing upon a shroud. Sedate, melancholy, harsh, there was still, in the look of Zenobia Landash's eyes and the brooding curve of her mouth some hint of rich peasant fantasy.

Zenobia laid down her needle for a moment and raised her spatulate fingers to adjust her kerchief, tied gypsy fashion

about her smooth brown braids. Her black sateen dress, plainly fashioned, was decorated at the neck with strings of coral beads. She recalled with some compunction how her brother-in-law had arrived hastily on horseback the previous day to impart the news. He had approached the house, hat in hand, as was the custom when announcing an approaching death. "Ai, ai!" Zenobia had shrieked, guessing the import of his visit.

"I have come to ask you to receive her at home, as it is not fit she should die in our house," said her brother-in-law.

"Bring her home, then," said Zenobia. Although without sentiment for her daughter, she had feared the censure of her neighbours, and had on that account hired two mourners to preside at the deathbed of the child. They sat now beside her, one a withered crone with potato-like features, as though she had been lately pulled up from the earth; the other, known as Tamara, a widow of great dignity and tall stature, dressed in a long black robe.

"It is not by chance that we called her the Luckless," remarked Zenobia, "since from birth she had been attended by misfortune."

"Ai, ai!" lamented the crone. She reached for a dish of pumpkin seeds and cracked one expertly between her few remaining teeth.

Granny Yefrosynia remarked, in her hoarse, yet not unpleasant voice: "Death takes his harvest whenever he chooses." She went to the stove, sampled the dumplings with a judicious nod, and gave the pot a brisk stir with the wooden ladle.

The sick girl strove to re-orientate herself. She looked at the woman beside her, and her lips formed the appeal, "Mother!" But she could not utter a sound; the woman was alien to her; there was no tenderness in her. She groped about desolately for the warmth newly lit in her heart. "Mike!" she whispered as she searched for his white hair.

She looked about the house, which consisted of one huge

room, like a reception hall. Everything had become unfamiliar in the five years she had been away, and yet she could still recall many things about it – the rows of Bukovynian tapestries upon the wall, over a horizontal pole, the clay stove on whose shelf she had often slept on winter nights; the sheaves of wheat and bunches of dried herbs hanging down from the rafters; the loom and spinning wheels; the deep window sills full of geraniums; the pearly ropes of garlic looped on the walls; the large gramophone with French horn.

There were children moving about, her brothers and sisters, creeping up to her bed to examine this newly-acquired sister whom they had forgotten, who had been sent from home before some of them were born. Whispers were heard, in a lisping voice, from a rosy-cheeked, bow-legged boy with yellow hair shaped like petals on his forehead: "Who is that girl?"

"She is your sister."

"Why is she so green?"

"She is sick with fever."

The boy looked longingly at the stove and sniffed:

"May I have a mushroom dumpling?"

"They aren't ready yet, Petey dear."

The boy gulped his anticipatory juices, his inner emptiness crying to be filled with the cosy bulk of dumplings.

"When will the party be?"

"There is no party."

"Then why is Granny cooking so many dumplings?"

"Hush, you will disturb your sister."

And now the sick girl's eyes fell upon two diminutive females, dressed exactly alike in flowered shawls and floor-length skirts. These were the twins, Masha and Tasha, but the girl, having been sent from home before they were born, thought at first the double vision was the result of illness. "Are they really two people?" she wondered, but her doubt was resolved when her mother made two gestures of wiping two noses. "They must be two."

The children, meanwhile, were holding a conference

concerning this sister, regarding whom they could obtain no satisfactory information, although they had been asking questions all day. Why was she so thin and small? Fialka, the eldest girl, a beauty, offered a solution:

"Uncle didn't want her so he sent her back."

"Why?"

"She is too thin."

"What is her name?"

"Gypsy."

"That's a strange name."

"She's a strange girl."

"She looks more like – "

"Like a monkey," said Fialka, and then regretted her impulse. "Sh, she's looking."

With a giggle, the children subsided, but the girl gave no indication that she had heard their jibes; she was looking away now to another part of the house.

Anton Landash, her father, sat in a corner called "Office," before him several small bags and a magnifying glass. He had been examining samples of grain seed and now, with the aid of his dictionary, he was composing a letter to the Manitoba Government. What an admirable person was her father, thought the girl, that even the government had heard of him!

Landash, meanwhile, was recalling, with some displeasure, the circumstance of the girl's birth. She was the third child, and after two daughters, Landash had set his heart on a son – a tall, handsome fellow who would inherit the farm and further Landash ambitions of becoming a great landowner. When Landash saw the puny girl child, he uttered a short laugh of contempt and disappointment. "Not much of anything," he said. "A gypsy brat."

On that same day, a band of gypsies had passed through the district, and Zenobia had taken it into her head that they had cast a spell on the child, or perhaps by some witchcraft had substituted their own brat for Zenobia's real child. Anton

had been the first to apply the name of Gypsy to the girl and it had clung to her, so that her real name was forgotten. "The Gypsy will leave before morning," he jerked his head contemptuously in the direction of the child.

"Father," she whispered, trying to tell him that she did not want to leave. Anton, absorbed in his work, thought of the girl only as some odd, stunted plant which had to be pulled up to make room for another, healthy growth. "Father," groaned the girl. Sweat burst out on her forehead like globules on butter.

Anton Landash looked up with impatience. Not having had time to pull down the blinds over the naked dislike in his eyes, the full force of his hatred struck the girl across the face and she shivered, burying her face in the pillow.

Landash got up now and went out of the house. Some time later, he returned with a wooden box, which he placed on the floor beside the bed. "I made my old tool box over to fit her," he said.

"She should have a real coffin," objected Zenobia.

"Do you think we are rich people to buy a coffin?" asked Anton with a harsh voice. "We have to pay for the service and the lot in the churchyard."

"What will people say?"

Anton shrugged. "I'll paint the box white." He got out some paint and a brush.

"I hope people will not talk." Zenobia bent over the bed and mopped the waxen face of the girl with a damp cloth. "She is picking at the bedclothes, a sign of death."

"She is playing the fiddle," said Anton as he watched the nervous motion of the hands, plucking as at some instrument, an eerie rhythm, born of the chaos in the feverish mind.

The girl's feeling of despair and loneliness increased. She regarded the preparations for her funeral, and tremors shook her. The faces about her, coldly chiselled out of stone, betrayed no pity for the girl; they looked at her without emotion, watching her progress toward death with a kind of

passivity, like spectators at a game. There was no help from them, nor from any human source. The only warmth in the room was the flame of the candles and toward these the dying girl directed a desperate plea: "Help me, candles," she implored. "Help me, help me." Tears glazed her eyes like glass marbles. The candles flickered and smoked, their flame appeared to become tarnished. Despair, with leaden fingers, pressed down her eyelids.

Granny was casting wax into water and murmuring incantations. She was convinced that some evil thing had caused the girl's illness and that the wax would take the shape of this evil and drive it from the girl.

Zenobia went about from guest to guest, serving poppy seed rolls and coffee. The guests relaxed and the talk assumed a melancholy suited to the occasion, being concerned with strange deathbed scenes.

Fearing the post-mortem vengeance of her fey child, for she felt guilty that she had sent her from home at so early an age, Zenobia began to extol the virtues of the dying girl, in a kind of premature keening, speaking not in extravagant terms, for she was a blunt person, but cautiously, being ill at ease in praising her luckless daughter. "She was very young, yet she earned her daily bread." This was the supreme peasant virtue, and Zenobia felt pleased that she could attribute it sincerely to her daughter. She went on, "Sorrow has ground her in its mill; she has eaten the bread of sorrow."

The mourners sighed, and alternated their rhythmically spaced lamentations.

"So young to die," wailed the crone.

"Fate did not plant flowers by her path," chimed in Tamara, she in the black robe. Her face, strong as death, reflected the sombre shadows of mourning.

"She will sleep a long night," crooned Zenobia. "Who will waken thee, my daughter?" The crone, whose every wrinkle was like the grave of some youthful hope, quavered, "The wind

asks of death, for whom does the horn sound to die?"

"It sounds for the young to die," continued Tamara.

"It sounds for the weary to rest," Zenobia took up the refrain.

"It sounds for fate." Granny's voice was ominous as Fate itself.

Zenobia stitched her wailing into the shroud, "Who will comb your hair? Who will plait your wreath? Who will give you to the bridegroom?"

"Ai, ai," the lamentation went on. "Ai, ai, a . . ." The sound droned on and on, like a drill on the ear drums of the girl.

"If she dies tonight, we can bury her tomorrow," said Anton, who had now finished painting the coffin. It was near dawn, the children had long ago gone to sleep, and the candles, with tears thick upon each other, had shrunk into themselves. Anton felt the girl's feet under the blanket. "She is turning cold."

Meanwhile, a thick fog had descended over the sick girl, enshrouded her, drifted into her mouth and nostrils, choking her. Lost, she drifted alone, fighting the stuff that suffocated her, groping for a way out. A confusion of voices entered her delirium, engaged in a weird conversation, a mixture of the real and the imagined. "Where shall we put her?" A voice sounded through the fog.

"In this box. We must put her in this box. Then she will never get out again." Desperate, the girl cried, "No, no!" but the fog engulfed her.

A man's voice, her father's, sounded, exasperated: "The Gypsy has chosen a fine time to die. The seed must go into the ground and here we are waiting for her to die."

"I won't go," she tried to protest. "I won't go." She thought she was walking with a crowd about her, pushing her, exerting their strength to thrust her more deeply into the fog, disposing of her, burying her. She looked down and saw that

she was wearing the long white garment which her mother was sewing. She put her hand to her head and felt a wreath of flowers. Walking thus, she felt disembodied. She was holding a candle in her hand, but every time she tried to light it, the fog put it out. A cold mist clamped down over her mouth and nostrils, strangling her. "Don't put me in the ground!" she protested. The wings of a crane appeared over her head and she reached out desperately. "Take me with you!" she begged.

Zenobia knelt beside the bed, hands over her face. "Why is this small flower plucked before it has bloomed? Why was it not permitted to grow and blossom?"

The girl became dizzy and faint; her pulse disappeared. When she recovered consciousness, she found herself in her father's arms. They had poured cold water over her head to revive her; it streamed over her burning face. As she opened her eyes there was a gasp: "She still lives." A tiny flicker betrayed life.

The fog had disappeared and faces swarmed all around her bed, but these faces appeared grotesque and huge, with fantastic features, like distorted caricatures of themselves. They swam about, closing in on her, shutting out the light. Darkness pressed, the final darkness.

"The spirit is leaving," said the father. Her face now assumed a mask-like appearance, as if life had fled. "We must let the soul out of the house."

Zenobia rushed to the window to open it, to allow the soul free passage so that it would not hold a grudge against the inhabitants and torment them by wandering forty days and nights about the place. She looked out into the starlit night and prayed, "Guide, O Lord, the soul of my daughter to walk through the bright gate of heaven."

All stood by, watching with awe the moment of death, but as the moments ticked away, they observed that the girl, while inert, was still quietly breathing. Halfway across the threshold of life and death she had stepped back and refused to pass.

"What a strong spirit the gypsy has!" exclaimed Anton, perplexed, yet admiring the unexpected strength of the frail body.

Zenobia continued sewing on the shroud. A sudden gust of wind tore the shroud from her hands and sent it gyrating across the floor in a kind of spectral dance. When the impetus of the wind was exhausted, the shroud flattened itself against the wall, and hung there for one ghastly moment before collapsing upon the floor. Zenobia, incredulous, watched this performance, believing the shroud to be bewitched. "This has never happened before to my knowledge!" she cried in agitation. "Is it a good omen or ill?" She hesitated to pick up the shroud which seemed to have a will of its own, and was bent on not being put to its assigned purpose. "A child who has no luck will not die, but live and suffer all its life."

Granny, imperturbable in the midst of the tumult, now stepped in to take charge of the situation. From the bags around her waist, she had taken an herb and was now scattering it over the bed of the girl, murmuring an incantation,

Sleep, little one, close your eyes,
Death, pass by this house tonight.
Go, illness, from this suffering child,
Come, sleep; come, health, come rest.

The old lady stood with a crafty smile upon her face. "I have fooled the Old Robber," she triumphed. From the oven she extracted a brick, wrapped it in grey flannel and placed it under the girl's feet. "She sleeps."

It was daylight now, and the square yellow candles squatted in their dishes like dowagers with their chins tucked into their dewlaps. The room, padded with slumber, had the stillness of a haunt. Only Zenobia Landash was moving about, bodiless as a shadow.

The girl opened her eyes and discovered that the aspect of the whole room had changed. The morbid presence of the

guest no longer lingered about, and freckles of sunshine played tag on the whitewashed walls. Her body was scoured clean of the illness which had befouled it, and now her spirit stood poised on tiptoes, like a ballet dancer ready to make an entrance. "The light has come back," she said aloud.

"God in Heaven, she still lives!" exclaimed her mother. She hurried to the girl's bedside and stared down at the face, no longer waxy but betraying a faint blush. After Zenobia had washed the girl's face and braided her hair, she removed her sweat-soaked clothing and put on her a clean shirt made of bleached flour sack. Then she brought a bowl of broth.

As it appeared now that the girl would not immediately die Zenobia decided to embroider the shroud at the neck sleeves. To entertain the girl, she brought a number of skeins of bright embroidery thread. *"Choose the ones you like best daughter."* The girl frowned as she looked at the black thread and pushed it away. "Green and yellow and pink, like the flowers I'll plant in our garden," cried out the girl. She held a long hank of cerise thread and began to unwind it, singing to herself the childish rhyme:

Doctor, doctor, shall I die,
Yes, my darling. so shall I.
How many years shall I live?
One, two, three –

At each figure, she made a knot in the silk, which hung like the scarlet thread of life between her fingers. At last she finished knotting. "One hundred and two years!" triumphantly she cried, as she contemplated the life stretching before her, knot by knot. What would she do with all those years, she who was only eleven? "That is too long!" she exclaimed. "Mother, I shall live to be one hundred and two years!"

Her mother, who had been watching this performance with interest, immediately read a fatalistic significance into daughter's outburst. "God in Heaven has sent a sign!"

By this revelation, Zenobia knew that the shroud would never be used, and that she must get rid of it at once. Snatching up the garment, she tore it and stuffed the shreds into the stove. She shivered as she scrubbed her hands, trying to conceal her repulsion. The girl watched in horror. "Why did you tear my dress?" she inquired. "That was for my wedding."

Her mother dried her hands on a fresh white towel and gave her a long, peculiar look. Before answering, she took a basin of holy water and sprinkled it about the house to exorcise the spirit of evil. "You are too young for such a dress," she said finally. "I'll get you another, red with yellow flowers, better for a little girl."

"And red hair ribbons, too?"

"Yes, ribbons, too."

A red dress! The prospect was so exciting that the girl, thinking about it, fell asleep. Her dreams, this time, were all of flight and happiness. She was free, she was dancing in a red dress and on each of her four pigtails she had tied an enormous bow of satin. The pigtails flew out in the wind as she danced, and suddenly by her side appeared a blond boy in overalls. They clasped hands and danced together. Then he was chasing her around a hay wagon and they were both laughing and the sun was shining.

When she woke, it was noon, and the sun was indeed shining through the windows and all over her face, so that her eyes were dazzled. A kettle was singing on the stove. Granny had replaced her turban with a green and yellow silk shawl, and now, looking quite pleased with herself, was placidly sucking a peppermint and rocking.

"I'm hungry," announced the girl in a firm voice. She lifted her head from the pillow and yawned. Her eyes felt moist and she blinked them several times, like a flower shrugging the dew off its petals. When her mother brought her a bowl of mush, she noted with pleasure that it was sprinkled with brown sugar.

"Mmmm," she murmured.

The house and yard stirred with life. Petey, standing outside with a wreath of dandelions on his head, was playing with a puppy. Fialka, the beautiful oldest girl, her arms full of pussy willows, was approaching from the creek. Voices of children were heard, laughing and shouting. On the kitchen floor knelt Zenobia, sorting out seed for the kitchen garden. Through the open window the smell of smoke drifted from the bonfire which her father had built to clear the yard of rubbish. Vitality began to stir in the girl's limbs as she stretched out her legs and pushed her toes forward, urging herself to grow.

Suddenly she sat up. Anton Landash was approaching the bonfire with a box in his arms. It was painted white, and would have made a fine window box for flowers. As she watched incredulously, her father placed the box on the fire and allowed the flames to consume it. "Father!" she protested weakly. The contrary behaviour of her parents puzzled her. First the dress and now the box had been burned. Nevertheless, as the box disappeared in the flames, she felt an unaccountable lightening of her heart. The conviction came to her, "Now the spring has come."

3
THE FAIRY TALE SPINNERS

THE HOUSE was still now, with the magic stillness of a spring afternoon, serene beneath the chirping of the kitchen clock. The girl was lulled by the sunshine into a peaceful mood of expectancy. Something marvellous was about to happen, born of that peculiar mood of childhood most receptive to fantasy. On such an afternoon, magic slippers commenced to dance, animals developed human personalities, golden mountains gleamed. . . .

In the few days which had elapsed since the crisis, the girl had gained enough strength so that she could be left alone in the house with Granny Yefrosynia, all the others having gone out to the spring work. The old lady sat now at the loom weaving a tapestry. Granny had one white curl, like a chicken feather, poking out from her shawl. Circling her throat, a necklace of many coins made music with every movement. Her features had once been clean-cut, as though sculptured by a chisel, but with age had become blurred in outline, like a melted candle. About her waist was a six-inch striped wool belt, from which hung numerous small leather bags in which Granny kept her treasures, such as tobacco, roasted pumpkin seeds, herbs. In one bag was a handful of earth from her native village. "What is it to be, then, a story?" questioned Granny.

"Yes, Granny, a story!" the girl clasped her hands with pleasure. To hear Granny tell a story – that was really something! Stories poured out of the old lady's mind "like grain out of a sack," as Grandfather Nestor used to say when

the girl, as a small child, had visited the old couple in their house near the village church.

Granny now began to tell the story of the Cranberry Flute, which concerned the secret murder of a beautiful girl by her jealous stepsister. The girl was transformed into a cranberry bush growing by the side of the road. A couple of travelling merchants, as they passed through the country, noticed the beautiful plant and cut a flute from the branches. The traveller began playing on the flute and the flute sang out:

Gently, gently, traveller, pray,
Lest upon my heart you play,
For a treacherous sister's knife
Took from me my youthful life.

And so the dreadful secret was revealed to the world. When the father of the girl heard the song, he said, "What kind of flute is this? It plays so beautifully that it makes my heart ache. Give it to me and let me play it." And the flute sang out with a human voice.

As Granny sang, the girl listened critically. She knew by instinct that the quavering sentimentality of Granny's voice was not adapted to this particular song. She heard, hovering about her, another tune – a high, youthful cry of anguish reproduced musically, capturing the tone of a flute. When Granny sang the song a second time, she protested, "That is not the right tune, Granny."

Granny stopped abruptly. She did not relish interruptions. "Well, you sing it, then," she snapped.

The girl hummed the tune in her mind, a high note of youthful anguish and entreaty.

Granny listened appreciatively, tapping her feet. "Yes, yes, I forgot," she murmured. "That is the way it goes. Thank you for reminding me, dearie." Although Granny had never before heard the tune as the girl had sung it, she did not inquire into its origin, but accepted it, as all folk tale spinners accepted

improvements on the original. The girl herself did not know she had composed a tune – she had heard the tune and knew it must be the right one. Stories, for her, were accompanied by melodies heard only in her mind – the running of a rabbit, the cry of a flute, the siren song of water nymphs.

It was this enchantment which lingered on that afternoon, which gave the girl the feeling that she herself, under its magic influence, was changing somehow, that some transformation was taking place in her. People sometimes imposed upon one an uncongenial personality which did not fit one, but which one had to wear, nevertheless, temporarily, like an unbecoming cloak, while another was being tailored for one.

"Now," said Granny, "I have something for you." She took a scrap of scarlet silk from a bag at her waist and gave it to the girl. "That silk," said Granny, "is from the dress of a gypsy."

"Who are the gypsies, Granny?" The girl rubbed the silk between her fingers.

"Folk who have no home, but wander about the earth."

"Am I a gypsy, Granny?" asked the girl.

"Lord forbid!" exclaimed Granny, but she seemed uneasy.

"Then why do the gypsies wander?"

"They were cursed by God."

The girl was struck by an idea. "Granny," she confided, "Granny, I would like to grow. I am too small."

"Yes," reflected Granny. "You could walk between the raindrops and not get wet."

"If I were not so small," continued the girl, "then father and mother would let me stay home, and I would not have to wander."

Granny regarded the girl with a shrewd look. "You will grow," she said positively. "You have many years for growing yet – one hundred and two years, haven't you? In that time, my dear, you might become a giantess."

Comforted by this logic, the girl leaned back on her pillow. She felt closer to the intense humanity of Granny than to her

mother and father, and wished that Granny would always live with them, instead of staying as an occasional visitor, as now. Her mother was an alien person, enclosed between two boards of stiffness and morbidity, but Granny could enter the child's world of fantasy and create something new and beautiful out of scraps, whether of cloth, food or words. Who could be unhappy in the presence of Granny?

Granny believed intensely in her stories, and the tales she told formed a gigantic story book, rich and full of life. The legend of the Cranberry Flute had travelled the seas and continents, and yet had an immortal hold on the imagination, this story of the human voice transferred to a musical instrument on the death of a girl. Distilled through the primitive mind of Granny it opened the door for the girl to the magic of poesy and legend.

4
THE SPRING DANCERS

"PEOPLE, SUMMER has come! People, summer has come!" The meadowlark spilled a golden cascade of notes upon the prairies, as he elaborated upon the immemorial call of meadowlarks in a new version which he had been practising that winter for his spring debut. Choirs of meadowlarks took up the call and relayed it far over the prairie: "People, summer has come!"

The girl stood by the road awaiting the arrival of her school mates. She felt the spring, like a peasant, with her body; her kinship with the earth was renewed. Smoothing down the folds of her red calico dress, she tossed her braids, tied with red satin hair bows. Her bare brown feet pounded to the rhythm of awakening life as she whistled through a blade of grass held between her thumb and forefinger. Like a robin moistly emerged out of an egg, she had had to make some adjustments to a new self which had begun to emerge in the weeks since her recovery.

"People, summer has come!" The prairie spring, with high exuberance, had rushed across the Manitoba prairie, blotting up the moisture and transforming the countryside with a haze of shimmering air, an enamelling of wildflowers. Tassels of the Manitoba maple tinkled like earrings with tiny beads of red, green and gold. "The tree is a gypsy," thought the girl. She looked up to see a robin and called to him, "Robin, robin, where did you spend the winter?"

Beneath her physical exuberance, she felt some fear at

meeting her schoolmates for the first time. Her throat was sore with suspense as she remembered that she could speak little English. Would the children accept her, or ridicule her?

Ta-ta-ta. Ta-ra-ta-ta. Ta-ta, ta-ta. She heard a noise from a distance and down the road a cloud of dust announced the arrival of her schoolmates. Arms full of marsh marigolds and pussy willows, a crowd of barefoot children advanced, tooting on whistles which they had cut from willow branches by the wayside. The girls, with buttercups in their hair, wore long skirts of red, green and blue calico almost down to their ankles; hair coiled in buns low down on the neck or braided in four braids with wool hanks and satin ribbons. The boys, with dandelions stuck behind their ears, or curled up like moustaches on their lips, wore overalls and white linen shirts embroidered at the neck and sleeves. They had rolled up one trouser to show their bare legs, and had pulled one overall strap off their shoulder, giving them an insouciant air. Dancing and singing, they came down the road to celebrate the rites of spring.

At the sound of their singing, the self-consciousness of the girl slipped off her like a garment. Music had always had that effect on her; it took her out of her shyness. She commenced running down the road to meet the crowd, jangling her lunch pail. Her feet, she noted, could give pleasure. Feet had formerly been for the purpose of walking wearisome miles after cattle, feet had been for treading up and down garden rows, feet had been for walking all night with a child in her arms. But now she realized that feet could give joy. Wonderful feet could run and dance, feet could jump and wriggle, feet could feel exhilaration as she ran with the wind.

As the cry of the meadowlark was heard, she stopped, and without thinking, imitated its song so exactly that all the children halted to listen. "Who's that?" they asked. Immediately the crowd of scholars, mocking the song of the meadowlarks, took up the refrain in,

TELL YOUR TEACHER ON YOU!
Your teacher on you!
On you! On you!

From all directions, in musical diminuendo, the intermingled call of larks and children sounded and resounded in a multiplicity of echoes all over the prairie.

Full of enthusiasm, the children swept the girl away with them as they marched on between the rows of trees, the poplars leaning eagerly over the road like gossips over a back fence. The wind stirred softly through the grasses, like a cat licking up cream.

One boy, dressed in linen shirt with embroidered gilet, had an orange cowlick jutting up at either side of his head, giving him the odd appearance of a juvenile satyr. He had devised Pan's pipes by cutting reeds in graduated lengths parallel to one another and joining them together with wax. His long limbs, gracefully functioning, as though on well-oiled pistons, marched to the ecstasy of his playing, as with arched torso he flung his head back and blew into his pipes. Running from behind, he took his place next to the girl in the calico dress and laughing, they clasped hands as he started off on a familiar song-game. "If I could run, I would run," he sang out in a husky voice.

The crowd, following after him, repeated, "If I could run, I would run," and suiting the action to the word, the children skipped forward.

"If I could skip, I would skip," continued the leader, skipping about.

"If I could skip, I would skip," carolled the choir, and forming couples, the children skipped about.

"If I could sing, I would sing, la, la, la, la," and the children sang with their leader, la, la, la, la, repeated over and over.

Spinning dizzily, the skirts of the girls billowing like enormous poppies on the road, the boys and girls advanced,

singing, clucking, skipping, thumping, clapping. Joy lit up the landscape. Dogs accompanied the procession, barking and frisking and leaping deliriously. Meadowlarks skimmed along the telephone wires. Birds became excited and flew over the group to ascertain the causes of their commotion, as their excitement increased to a frenzy.

Now the children came to a tiny whitewashed house where they had a call to make. The leader stepped forward, and hanging a garland on the blue door, knocked loudly.

"Who is there?" a voice called.

"It's the Maytime. Open up!" chorused the children.

"Welcome, Maytime!" The door opened. Out bounced a roly-poly man with a cheerful turnip face, yellow thatch of hair above a purple countenance, and greeting the children, he strode across the yard with the crowd following close upon his heels. Suddenly he turned around to catch them unawares and laughing, ha, ha, ha, ha, he opened his huge fists and tossed fifty shining new coppers into the air. Like a golden shower, the coppers descended upon the children. The girl in the red calico dress was directly beneath the shower, and as the children scrambled for coins, she picked up her red skirt and caught six coppers.

The young coryphæus had seized four other coppers and these he now flung in her skirt with a lordly gesture: "For you. For Maytime. For be rich."

As the fat man watched the children diving and scrambling for coins, he quivered with laughter, ha, ha, ha, ha, well pleased that for fifty cents he had purchased so much of youth, spring and laughter. When all the coins had been gathered, the man with the golden money held up his hand: "And now I have a favour to ask."

"Ask, ask, we will do anything!" cried the children.

"Bring good harvest to my crops!" he requested.

"We will! We will!" shouted the children. Forming a long chain, the children twined in a circular motion about the

fields, singing, "Around the field we have gone, calling on our brave St. George, to save these crops, from hail, from frost, from drought."

And so, like a procession of miniature bacchants, wreathed in flowers, drunk with spring, the rapturous throng approached the schoolhouse.

5
THE BOOK READERS

THE CHILDREN swarmed into the schoolhouse with disorderly enthusiasm, their bare feet swishing against the splinters. As they passed by the teacher's desk, they laid their floral offerings upon it, and then flopped noisily on the creaking wooden benches. Ian MacTavish examined each pupil, making a note of all those who had not appeared before. The settlers were prolific and each day some new pupil appeared, while others disappeared, never to return. Those who did come seemed almost scared, as if they had never seen people on their isolated homesteads. MacTavish recalled his first day of school, when one girl had come armed with a stick, for fear she might have to beat off the teacher like a wild animal. There were fifteen-year-olds in the first grade who had never seen a book.

The girl in the red calico dress, as she passed by, attracted him particularly, because of the curious way in which she regarded every object in the classroom. Pausing before the blackboard, she rubbed her finger across it stealthily. She touched other objects – pictures, desks, books. With a piece of red chalk, she scrawled on the blackboard. On her way to her seat, she sniffed the classroom air, a curious smell compounded of chalk, books, sawdust, lunches and bare feet.

"She's never been in a classroom before," MacTavish realized. He examined her more closely and discovered that this was the girl who had made the trip on the jigger with him;

several times since he had wondered what had happened to her.

"How alive she is!" he thought. "Who would think she'd been so close to death?"

Finding a seat near the window, through which she could see the creek and trees by it, the girl was attracted by the numerous charts and pictures with which the room was decorated. She scrutinized these carefully, made a note of her fellow pupils, and looked slyly at the teacher. Would he remember her?

MacTavish now turned to his flower-laden desk. "Are all these flowers for me?" At his look of astonishment, all the class burst out laughing. Pleased that they had "made a joke on the teacher," they felt kindly disposed to him, and he knew that he had made an auspicious beginning. As he arranged the flowers, he spoke casually about them, their colours, perfume, where they grew, their names.

The girl in the red dress swallowed the information greedily. She repeated to herself the names of the flowers – marsh marigold, crocus, violet, buttercup. With admiration, she noticed how many English words the other pupils knew; their poise in sharpening pencils and writing in their exercise books. They loved physical movement, drawing on the blackboard, handling coloured pegs and chalks, showing off their hand work. She opened her scribbler and looked at the clean white paper. How she longed to be a book-reader like all these others! Tentatively, she made a few strokes with her pencil.

"Let me sharpen your pencil," whispered the young lad of the cowlicks, who had somehow managed to get the seat next to her. Dumbly, she held the pencil out to him.

"Don't look so scared," he whispered, taking out his penknife.

"Who scared?" she smiled valiantly.

MacTavish, as he looked at his class, so full of joy and

vigour, despite their shaggy and untamed appearance, reviewed the goals he had set for himself: to broaden their horizons, to help the parents to adjust themselves, to develop every pupil by making each day a complete, creative entity. For some of his pupils, he knew, that one day might constitute their entire formal education. He was excited, therefore, to think that he was, so to speak, scratching on new ground. Having in him much of the pioneering spirit of his Scottish ancestors, he felt it was a challenge to him to make book readers of the descendants of the men and women in sheepskin coats.

"Now, what shall we do? Sing a song, perhaps? Yes, I think we can start off with a song."

"Yes!" chorused the children. "Yes, yes, yes!" One by one they held up their hands in agreement. All liked singing. They were in a mood of excitement and could not have settled down immediately to humdrum tasks. Accordingly, they were set to march around their desks, chanting, "Good morning, Merry Sunshine!" Some of the pupils knew English, but others, learning by example, tried to imitate the rich Scottish burr of the teacher, overlaying it with bizarre overtones of Swedish, Polish and Bukovynian.

"Good Morning" was followed by "Annie Laurie," which the class sang in harmony. The teacher, waving his arms with enthusiasm, was surprised at the natural ability of his pupils to harmonize; song seemed born in them. Above the noise of cheerful young voices MacTavish now detected one, a low voice overlaid with the velvety fuzz of a crocus petal, yet strong enough to dominate the whole classroom. Who was this singer? He scanned the eager faces one by one. The voice appeared to come from the direction of a big, glossy-eyed girl who was singing with mouth wide open to reveal all her splendid teeth. The teacher smiled appreciatively to her, but to his puzzlement the rosy mouth closed and the glossy eyes wandered to the window where a butterfly had alighted.

Meanwhile the velvety voice continued deep and true from

somewhere behind the girl. MacTavish walked unobtrusively up the aisle to investigate. He stopped short as he discovered that the unique voice was issuing from the scrawny throat of the little brown girl in the red and yellow calico dress. Her thin chest puffed out like a pigeon's, she was singing the song whose words she did not understand, but whose beautiful tune had aroused a flame of joy in her heart.

When the class had finished the song, there was a moment of silence, and then MacTavish motioned gently to the girl and said, "You, little girl with the beautiful voice, let us hear you sing alone."

The girl turned scarlet and hid her face in her sleeve. "She don't speak English very good," cried out the pupils. All stared at her. Where had she come from?

"She's shy and wild," thought MacTavish. "Now is the time to teach her self-confidence." He insisted, "Come, let us hear you. Let all the class hear your beautiful voice."

"I don't know words," gasped out the girl, and put her hands over her face as her thick accent betrayed her. She trembled with shame. Never had it occurred to her that she would be singled out for a solo performance.

"Then sing, la, la, la," MacTavish sang the first phrase and encouraged her to follow him. "Come, sing." She remained mute. "Look at me," he commanded. She looked up at him and he put into his eyes all his authority and compassion, willing her to obey him, to trust him. Suddenly her face relaxed and she began to sing the Scottish song, interpreting the unfamiliar tune with few errors. What caused MacTavish to marvel was that she created of it a strange new melody of haunting melancholy, quite unlike the original. It sounded like the song which the "sheepskins" had sung that memorable evening on the track motorcar. "Who is that girl?" the pupils whispered among themselves. MacTavish felt that he had made a step in the conquest of the girl's diffidence: the thick crust of neglect obscuring her personality had been broken.

As several new pupils were present that morning, MacTavish began to enter their names in the register. Having heard names with a plenitude of unfamiliar vowels and consonants, MacTavish had decided to call his pupils by their first names until he had mastered pronunciation, but was frustrated in this purpose by an unforeseen circumstance. "What is your name?" he asked the girl in the first seat.

The girl stood up and replied, "Mary Khvalyboha."

The teacher smiled, "Good morning, Mary."

"And yours?" He proceeded to the next pupil, who sat looking at a butterfly which had plastered itself against the school window. The girl turned calf-like eyes upon the teacher. "Mary Bezkorovainy," she said, and looked back at the butterfly.

MacTavish frowned. He saw now that instead of studying Greek and Latin he might have better been employed learning modern European languages. Then he turned to the next girl who, with flaxen hair and blue eyes, turned out to be, "Mary Shakhnevych."

Was it possible that all his pupils were called Mary? An idea came to MacTavish. He singled out Mary of the calf eyes and suggested, "How would you like a new name?"

"A new name? Oh yes, I like a new name all right!" carolled the girl. "Everybody is Mary in this school. Never can tell who is calling!"

"You will be Marigold."

The girl beamed. Marigold! She nodded triumphantly to all.

"And you – " The teacher looked at Mary Khvalyboha. "You will be Rosemary." Rosemary! The children's faces were all alight. Marigold! Rosemary! They had never heard such beautiful names. "All like flowers!" exclaimed Rosemary.

MacTavish came at last to the girl in the red calico dress. "What is your name?" Everyone in the class turned to look at her. Stricken with panic, the girl sat dumb. How could she

confess her namelessness, or admit to the names which her family called her? No name? Gypsy? Little Bit of Nothing? Then she had an inspiration. Rising to her feet, she announced in a firm voice, "My name Mary Landash." And without waiting for comment, she pleaded hurriedly, "Please, I like new name, too."

MacTavish regarded her thoughtfully, and despite her plain face, her singular personality reminded him of the tiger lily of the prairie. "Your name will be Lily!" he exclaimed. "That dress of yours is just the colour of our prairie tiger lilies."

"Lily!" The girl breathed with ecstasy. She made a stroke on the page of her scribbler, in order to inscribe her name there and thus give it permanence. Looking sideways with some childish coquetry, she whispered to her neighbour: "How you write it?"

The boy smiled a superior smile, seized her scribbler and wrote with scholastic flourish, "Lilli Landash." That was she, that was her name. She touched the letters with her fingertips, as if absorbing her new identity.

"Hello, Lilli." The boy extended his hand. "I am Vanni Karmaliuk."

"Hello, Vanni." They clasped hands. "How big and shining her eyes are," he thought. He did not know she was plain.

Columbus now discovered America in the classroom with the assistance of a globe and compass. Following the mariner as he progressed from one adventure to another, the teacher showed the pupils the countries and seas over which Columbus had travelled and invited each pupil in turn to examine the globe. Lilli, when her turn came, pored so long over the fascinating object that MacTavish inquired, "Are you looking for something, Lilli?"

Still Lilli would not yield her place. Standing with hands clasped around the globe, striving to express the many impressions which were thronging to her mind, she exclaimed

at last in triumph, "I have whole world in my hands!" The class now exploded with the mirth of Maytime, and the long, lean face of the Scot relaxed in a smile. Lilli's remark seemed to him symbolical of his task – to put knowledge into his pupils' hands so that they might indeed possess the world.

As Lilli took leave of Vanni at the end of the school day, they stood looking at each other, inarticulate but conveying their interest to each other with glances.

"You sing beautiful today, Lilli," ventured Vanni at last.

"In Maytime everyone sing beautiful and be happy, Vanni."

The boy reached out and pulled one of her pigtails. "To grow."

"I think I never be big, Vanni," sighed Lilli.

"Never mind, Lilli," consoled Vanni. "Sometimes flower which is small is sweeter like big flower."

The beauty of the day overwhelmed them. "I think I never see such a day in my life again, Lilli," breathed Vanni. They swayed, moved by the rhythm of returning life.

Spring turned somersaults about them.

"Good-bye, Vanni, good-bye."

Lilli lifted herself on her toes and whirled like a leaf down the road. When she came to the railway intersection, she paused to look down the track and from a distance the sound of the jigger came to her. It was Mike the section-hand, recognizable by his white thatch and plaid windbreaker.

Lilli, in mad delight at seeing her Irish patron again, and striving to tell him in a few words the essential happenings of the day, as well as to reassure him about her health, flung her arms up and dancing, she shouted incoherently, "Annie Laurie! Christoph Columb! Lilli Landash!"

Mike brought the jigger to a halt, incredulous that this tornado of energy could be the dying girl whose pathetic fate had haunted him for weeks. "Well, as I live!" he exclaimed. "It's my little pee-wee, and how are you?"

"No more pee-wee!" shouted the girl. "One inch I grow!"

They both laughed. Mike reached over and pinched her cheek. "Are you from school?"

"Oh, yes, Mike, I go to school."

"And what did you learn?"

"Learn song, Annie Laurie. Go with Christoph Columb find America. Get new name, Lilli."

"Well, now, you're an educated lady."

Lilli preened herself complacently.

Seeing that vitality, Mike's conviction grew that her zest and originality would serve to enrich the country, and he felt grateful that he had had some share in preserving them. His investment in her was safe for life, and he felt a complacent pleasure, as if something had been added to himself; and if that small light would not shine always in his presence, at least he would know that it was glowing to good purpose, somewhere.

"Well," he said finally. "Good luck, Lilli. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye, good-bye! Oh, good-bye, Mike!"

Lilli ran down the track after the jigger, calling and waving her hands until Mike was out of sight, and singing to the wind, "Oh, how my heart full of happy!"

PART TWO
Songs of the Seasons

1
THE SOIL TILLERS

LIFE WAS returning to the prairies. The sound of wings preceded the appearance of a great wedge of geese storming the air. The earth breathed deeply as it emerged from the deep-freeze which had locked it for six months. From fence-post to fence-post, the roundelay of the meadowlark throbbed in a great, overwhelming burst of joy. Odours of burning green brush, of sticky poplar buds, of melting snow arose from the spongy brown soil. On the Landash farm, the spring work was beginning. From dawn, the figures of the children had dotted the fields as they piled twigs and rubbish, picked up stones, chopped down saplings and hauled them to the pyre. Zenobia in red skirt and green shawl was seated on the ground beside the house, sorting seeds for her kitchen garden. Each gesture was sure, as she was now working in her own element. Anton had set a tree stump on fire and now, like an enormous candle it blazed in a pillar of flame and smoke, crackling in the spring breeze. On an uncleared field, Lilli and Anton were breaking the land with an enormous plough that Anton had made in his smithy that winter. Anton held the reins of the horses while Lilli, dressed in boy's shirt and overalls, guided the plough. As the ponderous share cut a four-foot lap through the stubborn soil, a slow, burning ache began to make itself felt in her muscles. She staggered over the clods of earth which cut sharply into her bare feet. Searing pains crept up her back and legs. A red light glared before her eyes and tears trickled burningly down her face. Her mouth was swollen and dry

inside and her eyes bulged with strain. She lifted her face to catch the gentle breeze which was stirring the atmosphere.

"O God, how it hurts!" thought Lilli. "Oh, let me stop for a minute to rest!" Sweat was beginning to drip down her cheeks, and on the back of her shirt a wet stain spread over her shoulders. "Father!" she gasped, trying to attract his attention, but he did not hear her.

Anton drove his horses on, noting the beauty of their plump, satiny sides. He looked greedily at his land, encompassing it, feeling the pride of ownership. "My land, my land," he murmured to himself. He felt as if he were holding in his hands that rich virgin soil, running it through his fingers with a pleasure almost sensual. He whistled as he walked, swaying his massive shoulders in rhythm. All around him, he felt the elemental craving of the earth, he responded to it with a strong physical reaction. He looked across to his neighbour's field, where a woman walked over the earth casting seed with her hand in a circular, primitive rhythm. Her gesture seemed futile to Anton, and he thought, "Better she had never left the old country." When he looked up into the skies, the clouds formed, or so it seemed to him, the pattern of a harvest field – they stood about like sheaves in the fall, and the words of an old peasant song ran through his mind: "O thou beloved harvest field, O thou earth from which I gather the harvest which springs from the soil and flourishes through bitter distress." The bitter distress of the old country had changed to the promise of the new, he thought, as he saw his son Petey run about the fields. He thought that he was building for the future of Petey, and he was pleased that future generations of his seed would benefit by his present labour.

Absorbed in his dreams, he did not notice the small figure guiding the plough behind him, and was not concerned when Lilli tripped over a clod of earth, panting as the plough nearly slid from her hands. The veins on her arms stood out, and her muscles pulled as though her arms were being wrenched from

her shoulders. "O God how it hurts!" she thought again. There was only the will left to drive her undersized body. "Must do it, must do it!" she exhorted herself. She strove to divert her mind by catching at the many details of change which spring had wrought on the landscape – the shoots of green on the poplars, the moist, tender fragrance of prairies after winter, the songs of birds as they arose in the wake of the plough, the flight of some hawk across the great prairie sky. As the plough turned back, Lilli held up her hand to wipe off the sweat and dirt. Again the plough slipped from her arms, jerking in a zigzag. She stumbled in the furrow.

"Watch out there, Lilli!" shouted Anton. He jerked angrily at the reins, and the horses plunged on, dragging Lilli with them. The heat of the noon day was upon them, and Lilli's clothes, now soaking wet, clung to her like a second, wrinkled skin.

A meadowlark sang, rising from the earth like a shadow. The song gave Lilli momentary relief. She looked up from the furrow and thought, "The earth is full of music." It gave her strength to finish the row, to disregard the dirt which flew up over her arms and legs and face, bruising and scratching her skin. She envied the freedom of the bird, as she was released at last from the plough and staggered blindly to the water trough. She stooped over it to bathe her hot face and drew back in horror as she saw her reflection mirrored in the water, covered with scratches and dirt and blood. She splashed water freely over her face and hair and stood gasping and choking as the water dripped down over her face. Leaning back against the trough to steady herself, she could not control the shuddering of her body. Her hands were a mass of aching bruises.

"Lilli!" her father called out impatiently. "Come help with the horses!"

She bent her head once more to examine that face, with its frightful expression of strain, its huge eyes starting out of their

sockets, the sweat rolling down, the mouth open in anguish, the features so distorted that she could hardly recognize herself. The breath seemed beaten out of her body. She grasped the lip of the trough and plunged her face down again and again. Streams of water ran over her face and figure. She thrust her hands into the water and gasped as the coolness gave her relief. Beneath the surface, she watched the enlarged veins writhing like snakes under her skin. The knobby muscles of her upper arms bulged out like balls.

"Lilli!" Anton Landash called out again.

Lilli could not obey the call; her limbs refused to take orders from her mind. Dazedly, she stood watching her veins writhe beneath the water. They seemed more like snakes than ever, especially when she regarded them through half-shut eyes. To close out the sight, she drove her head down into the water again.

Anton looked about and spied Lilli standing by the trough. He strode over and regarded her with incredulity while she went through this fantastic performance, like one demented. "Are you mad?" He seized her and dragged her to her feet. His pride was outraged by the spectacle of this half-drowned daughter, hair and face and clothes dripping, gasping and choking. Raising his whip, he struck her about the head and shoulders, then shook her violently and threw her from him. She lay sprawling on the ground. "When will you learn to come when I call you?" he exclaimed with exasperation. "Go into the house." She staggered over the steps into the kitchen and stood for a moment, the water running down her body, so that her shirt clung to her chest, revealing the outline of her small breasts. She took up a towel to dry herself.

As she stood near the window she could see someone approach on the road, a familiar figure riding on a horse, the teacher, Ian MacTavish, coming to visit. "Mr. Mac!" she thought in consternation. She did not wish to be caught in such a condition, and ripping her shirt and overalls from her,

she began to put on clean clothes with trembling fingers. By the time MacTavish had come into the yard, she was completely clothed.

She ran out to meet him, so eager that she could hardly speak. As he dismounted, she said, "Come in, please." Her face and hair were still moist, but her shirt was clean, and she wore dry overalls rolled up from the ankles. MacTavish noticed the bruises on her bare arms and legs, but gave no indication that he had seen them. "Is your mother home, Lilli?" He made a few steps forward. "Mother is at Granny's," replied Lilli, flushing. "But Father like to see you. Wait here," she said. "I bring him."

She ran to Anton, who was in the stable. He turned around with a frown and made a step forward as if to strike her, but she forestalled him by saying, "Oh, teacher come. Oh, Mr. Mac here, father." He checked his impulse and made haste to leave the stable. He had already found the teacher a shrewd man with a practical knowledge of farming and welcomed the opportunity to talk to him. He strode over to MacTavish and gripped his hands. "Good that you have come. There is much to talk, much to learn." The two men, despite the dissimilarities of their characters, had a sound respect for each other. In the affairs of the community, MacTavish had learned to like and admire Landash, so as he returned Anton's welcome, he said, "I'd like to hear something about this irrigation scheme of yours, Landash."

Leaving the two men engaged in conversation, Lilli rushed into the house and began to set the table with a clean cloth and paper flowers. She brought the best food up from the cellar, and by the time the two men had entered, a platter of chipped beef with sour cream and horseradish stood on the table.

The men sat down while Lilli waited on the table. The teacher, although he spoke only to Anton, was aware of every one of Lilli's movements. He noted the bruises on her arms

and her downcast, apparently submissive behaviour. Yet there was, in the glance of her eyes as she looked at her father, something like inner rebellion. He noticed that her legs were much longer than they had been when he last saw her; her overalls, rolled up to her knees, revealed a fine ankle and a slim, high-arched foot. When he caught her eye, she smiled, and the smile gave radiance to her sombre face.

"She's good around the house," said Anton, with a nod in Lilli's direction. She stood now by the window, humming a tune to herself.

"Don't you think she's rather young to do such heavy work?" asked MacTavish pointedly.

"She has to learn to work hard," said her father, as he cleared his plate of the chipped beef. "Better she should learn now. Besides," he added, as he helped himself to the last of the sour cream, "Lilli will never grow big. When she was born, I thought she was midget. Ha, ha," he laughed, not noticing the flush of shame on Lilli's cheek.

MacTavish, who had seen Anton strike his daughter, did not try immediately to interfere, since he knew he must not antagonize Anton, one of the most influential men in the Bukovynian community. Besides, he had other plans for Lilli, and so he said, only, in a mild voice, "Well, among us Scots, there is a saying that fine things come in small parcels."

The teacher had brought with him a sample of grain seed, which he now poured on the table while Anton ran the reddish kernels through his fingers. "This seed," said MacTavish "came originally from your own country, but has been much improved."

"Where did you learn all these things, MacTavish?" asked Anton, pleased. He thought that the teacher spoke in an intelligent manner and imitated it, using words which he had looked up in the dictionary. MacTavish was something of an amateur agronomist and described some of the experiments which Canadian scientists had made to develop superior seed.

He was surprised at Anton's shrewd comments. "If only you had an education, you might have been a scientist."

"What do I need with education?" roared Anton. "I get all my lessons from nature." Nevertheless, he was pleased. "I'm sending my boys to school," he said. "I want them to become real men – not, as we elder people, to kiss the hands of the noble, not to bow, not to say, 'yes, yes, your honour,' but to stand up straight, to look people in the eye and say, 'I'm a free man.'" He went on to tell the teacher something of his background in the old country and the motives which had impelled his people to migrate. MacTavish never admired Anton so much as at this time. A man who partook of the intolerance of the earth itself, Landash was possessed by that desperate compulsion of the "sheepskins" who had to skip centuries in a single generation, eradicating in themselves the deep traces of the serf. "The land is in your blood, I see," he commented when Anton had finished.

"From many years back," replied Anton, still caressing the grain on the table. "My grandfather, my great grandfather before him, all lived on the land." He sighed as he recalled his peasant ancestry. "We have a saying in our country, with fire, with water, with the wind, do not make friends, but make friends with the earth."

MacTavish chuckled. He had been keeping a notebook full of information regarding the life of these people, and already knew something of the language. "Do you mind my writing that down?" he asked, taking his notebook from his vest pocket. He opened the first page and read something he had written months back concerning these immigrants: "Their language is related to nature and describes with scientific accuracy the natural features of the landscape – animals, birds, conformations of land. It is concerned with herbs, sorcery, the song of birds, festivals, cloud formations, the market place, spinning and dyeing, with peasant wisdom. There is a beautiful word, *tyrlo*, which means the resting-place of birds at

night. With a single word, they express such intricate conceptions as, "a piece of arable land ploughed by one pair of oxen during one day;" "an ox with a tuft of hair between his horns;" "a petticoat made of silk dyed with cochineal;" "an adorned candle used at match-making;" "a fidgety man shifting from one place to another;" and "an ochre brown paint used for decorating earthenware."

Every detail of the house and its furnishings interested MacTavish. He had already noted in other homes the rows of kilims or tapestries which hung over a long pole suspended from a rope about one foot from the ceiling, covering almost all the wall to the floor. Now he watched Lilli as, preparatory to baking, she opened the clay stove and scratched the bottom with a rake to test its degree of heat. The stove, six feet wide and eight feet long, was made of a basketwork of willow twigs coated over with the clay found in swamps, and was supported on a platform built on four posts. "The bread you bake in such an oven," he remarked as Lilli sealed the oven, "has a very good flavour. It seems to be evenly baked."

"The crust, too, is never burned," added Anton as Lilli brought tea with lemon. He put a lump of sugar in his mouth and sucked the tea.

Lilli, after she had tended to the men, returned to the window, looking out over the swamp, where a great flock of geese arose and headed north. Their barbaric trumpeting at first blared compelling like the noise of an orchestra, then gradually diminished as their forms faded in the skies. Anton frowned, scarcely noticing the geese. "It's hard to get the soil here under cultivation," he remarked, "because of the tangle of willow and poplar in that low swamp." As he pushed back his chair from the table, he suggested that Lilli take MacTavish around the farm, while he himself would attend to pressing work. "Take the teacher around the farm and show him everything," he said. "I have some work to do or I'd take him round myself."

The two walked out into the yard, beneath the archway of trees, which, interlaced over a ploughed road, formed a protected entrance. "Like a church," commented Lilli. As they came into the fields, MacTavish stopped to look at Lilli, wanting to see her apart from her father. Susceptible to the appeal of tenderness, Lilli looked shyly down, rubbing her bare feet together. This was her first opportunity to be alone with the teacher, whom she adored. Her heart thumped with ecstasy. How she longed to talk to him, to ask him about the great world beyond! She wanted to say something clever, but she was tongue-tied. "The earth is rich here, Mr. Mac," she pointed out. "Everything grows big here."

As they walked on, MacTavish tried to analyze his own feelings. Why was he so deeply moved by this girl? Why, of all his pupils, did she please him most? How strangely stirred was he by her! And how easily the onlooker might be deceived as to her rare quality! He asked, "Will you come to school, Lilli?"

She shook her head. "Father won't let me. I have to work on land."

"How old are you? You can't be fourteen." He stopped to look at her childlike form which formed a strange contrast to the premature knowledge of death written on her face. He knew that children living three and a half miles away from school were not compelled to attend, nevertheless, he longed to have her as a pupil. "She is not like any other child hereabouts," he thought, "nor, for that matter, like any child I have ever met." Lilli, meanwhile, answered his question, "Don't know how old I. Father say I am too old to go to school."

MacTavish could see that something was tormenting her. She had a thought which struggled like a captive bird for liberation from the dark recesses of her mind. He could tell by the swift change of colour, the upward glances which she directed quickly at him and as quickly withdrew. At last, in a choked voice, eyes cast down, in an agony of shyness, she

exclaimed, "Oh, I like to learn talk like you. My tongue lame like old horse."

He considered her for a moment. "Would you, Lilli?"

She nodded. A smile lit up her face, displayed her wide mouth, beautifully curved, her small white teeth.

"Look at me."

She raised her eyes to his. How lovely was her defencelessness, he thought! Like a very young, wild deer – the big eyes, proud, shy, "as if in one instant she'd run away." When he said to her, "Anyone can learn," a light of hope gleamed in her eyes. "Teach me."

"I'll give you your first lesson now. Come, let's sit down here – " He indicated a log on the bank of the creek. They sat down, faces turned to each other. For a moment they said nothing, MacTavish deliberating where he should begin, then Lilli, eyes uplifted, pointed upward. "Look, Mr. Mac, how straight rows in ploughed skies."

"Ploughed skies?" He was startled by the figure of speech. "Look like field, all ploughed with golden plough."

MacTavish looked up at the orderly row of clouds in the sky and thought, "This closeness to nature is something we lose in the cities. We can't describe it, because we've lost it."

"I'm ready now for lesson, Mr. Mac," Lilli said demurely, reminding him of her presence. He came to with a start.

"Say after me, I think that I can learn to speak very well."

"I tink – " began Lilli. She stopped. "Wrong, isn't it?" He nodded. "Think, Lilli. Like this. Put your tongue up against your teeth, and say think – " He demonstrated the proper actions.

"Think – " she brought out with triumph. "Think!" she repeated.

"Good. Now go on."

"I think dat – that – " She smiled as she made a conscious effort. "Now I know how to say – that."

"Right." He was pleased with her progress.

She went on – "I think that I kin – " He stopped her. "Can, Lilli, not kin. Watch my face; watch the way my lips and tongue move. Where does the sound come from? In any language it is the same; when people are speaking a language you don't know, watch the muscles of their face, the lips and tongue; by imitating them, you can make the same sounds."

"Can!" Lilli brought it out with triumph. She looked at him for approval.

"Now, go on."

"I think that I can lorn – " She frowned. "Oh, that is hard, Mr. Mac!"

"Learn, not lorn." He demonstrated the positions of the two vowels. "Learn – like this." She watched him closely.

"I think that I can learn to spik – "

"Speak, not spik."

"I am so stupid!" she laughed. "All the time, mistakes!" At such times, glints of mischief appeared in her eyes.

"You are not stupid. How can you learn, without mistakes? Everyone makes mistakes. Take it again. Patience will do it."

"I think that I can learn to speak wery vell."

MacTavish smiled. "Those v's and w's are troublesome, aren't they? Let me show you how. For the v, the lip beneath the teeth; for the w, the lips puckered out. Like this, very well, very well – "

"I think that I can learn to speak very well." She paused, then clapped her hands. "Oh, Mr. Mac, it is all right, isn't it?"

"Say it again."

Lilli repeated the sentence. "Oh!" she breathed. "It comes out right again." She continued, with excitement, "You know, all the time I will speak like this. Everybody will be surprised. Easy when you know how!"

"Like anything else."

"I will teach you sometime our language, Mr. Mac," she offered as they scrambled to their feet and continued to walk

about the farm. The children were still busy out in the fields. Petey, a red cap on his head – he was fond of red, and always wore an article of this colour – had seized a large stone and now, with a rope around it, was trying to haul it away by pulling and dragging. Finally, unable to make any progress, he sat down on the stone, and laughed with such a carefree air that Lilli said, "Petey loves the land. For him, life will be good. He will be a real Canadian, Mr. Mac." She was so staunch in her loneliness that MacTavish asked, in an impulse of pity, "Don't you play with other children?"

She averted her eyes and shook her head. Something of her solitude betrayed itself in her voice as she replied, "I like to go by myself, walk, look at skies, listen to wind, sing, make plan – "

"What plan?" MacTavish interrupted.

"What to do when I grow up." She lifted her eyes to his.

"What would you like to do?"

"Sometime I dream I am in city, free, happy, can live how I like." She looked into the distance while she described her ambition, as though all these marvellous things could there be seen.

"Each person," said MacTavish, "has a right to live, not as someone else wills him to live, but as he himself feels within his heart that he must live. Some day, your time will come."

"Oh, when that day will come?" whispered Lilli with sad desperation. They paused to listen to the wind in the grass. "Like girl combing hair," said Lilli. "Like whispering on silk." They strolled across the fields.

"Perhaps you can teach me something, too, Lilli."

"I can teach you?" She peered up at him. "You are joking, yes?"

"No, Lilli, I'm not joking. . . ." His face was quite sober as he asked, "Tell me, what song was that you were singing in the house?"

"Old song." She was flattered that he had noticed it.

"Who taught you?"

Lilli remained silent, reluctant to reveal herself. As she stood in the brilliant sunshine, dressed shabbily in men's clothing too large for her, defensive yet secret, she had a feminine allure, the beginning of womanhood. MacTavish could not look at her without a stirring of emotion, compounded of pity and something akin to excitement, a consciousness that here was something rare and undeveloped. He asked again, "Where did you learn that song?"

She spoke with head averted. "From old people. In winter, when snow come, all sit around and sing, fire in big stove and snowflake fall on window. Everyone sing, so sad, so far away."

"Do you sing often, Lilli?"

"Oh, yes!" she exclaimed. "All around me I hear songs." This singular moment of self-revelation was almost too much for the reticent girl, but suddenly she lifted her head and looked with strange intensity at MacTavish. "I hear now," she exclaimed. "Listen, listen!"

Wild music arose from everywhere around them – the church bells, the wind, the birds arising from the swamps, the insects, the trees. Lilli stood barefoot and bareheaded on a little knoll, head raised to the sky, watching intently the procession of clouds. It was almost like an attitude of prayer, prayer to the inanimate forces of nature. . . . Here in this land, scarcely redeemed from the wilderness, old legends lived on in the winds, the sunshine, the clouds. Lilli moved with the wind, not disturbed by it, adapting herself to its rhythm. Everything provided a background for her – the grace of her movements, the animation of her face and body, the expressiveness of her voice. So excited was she that MacTavish could see her heart throbbing through her ragged shirt. Standing thus, you did not notice her shabby clothing; she appeared a heroic figure; the rags in which she was clothed, part of the shaggy landscape.

"Listen!" She closed her eyes and began to sing. The wild

strains, supremely fitted to her surroundings, rose in a kind of ancestral chant, like the cry of women bereaved, and the wind formed a natural accompaniment. MacTavish was stunned by the deep emotion which welled up from that slight body, disturbed that a half-grown girl could sing with such great feeling. Out of what depths of racial tragedy had that song sprung; how many centuries of oppression had been necessary to produce that feeling? In all their traditions, how conscious these people were of their past, so that their music was like the cry of the soul for freedom. Little by little, MacTavish thought, he would piece together the past that had created Lilli.

"You sing with great feeling," he said when she had finished.

"Those who suffer most can sing most beautiful, my mother said once to me, Mr. Mac."

"It's strange that you, so young, should know how to sing these old songs."

"Oh, I feel it belongs to me!" Lilli exclaimed. "When old people tell stories, when granny tells fairy tale, when mother sings of old country, I get all excited; it makes me feel rich and warm." She turned to him and with eyes shining demanded, "Why *you* like such old song?"

MacTavish, a little disconcerted at having the tables turned, replied, "They tell me how people lived, dreamed, loved long ago. People of every country get to know each other by songs."

"Annie Laurie?" Lilli smiled and threw her head back. It was a sudden and unexpected gesture of coquetry which amused the teacher because of its very naiveté. Lilli, seeing that he was amused, laughed also, although she did not guess the reason for his amusement. "What are you thinking, Mr. Mac?" They had reached the limit of the Landash farm, marked by a windbreak, and they now stood ready for the trip back to the house.

"Some poetry I read as a schoolboy." MacTavish was

reluctant to return; he was invigorated by his contact with these people, as the giants of old became stronger by contact with the earth.

"Tell me about that poetry." The word was new to Lilli, but she divined what it meant.

"It's about a girl like you, Lilli."

"Like me? Then truly I must hear."

As they cut back across the fields, MacTavish in a vibrant, low voice – he was an excellent reader of poetry – began to recite:

> Behold her, single in the field,
> Yon solitary highland lass –

Lilli was enchanted. "Oh, that is truly like me, Mr. Mac!" she exclaimed when he had finished. "To sing without ending! Such beautiful words I never hear before!"

As MacTavish rode away from the farm, he looked back and saw the shaggy figure of Anton Landash silhouetted against the horizon, his sheepskin coat slung over his shoulders, and the big, home-made plough standing in the earth beside him, and these figures appeared to symbolize for MacTavish all the soil tillers who had worked upon the land to break the Canadian wilderness.

When he got back to his teacher's shack, MacTavish wrote in his diary: "Today I have learned something of the cost of settling our country. These sheepskins who settled here with little assistance from our government had little to sustain them in their pioneering life except their conviction, 'Free land and strong hands open the door to the future for our people.' As for Lilli, she is so much a product of nature at its wildest that I don't know whether it would be right to encourage her to leave this environment. Would she lose her original qualities, or discover opportunities for the free development of her talents? It is as though an anachronism of circumstances had produced a genuine folk poet in this isolated Bukovynian community of

Manitoba. I feel almost as though I were a spectator of history delayed; it's like seeing a film run backward." He paused while he struggled to find expression for the faith which he had in Lilli, then wrote: "I believe, however, that given a few leads, Lilli will stumble into the right path by herself."

2
VOICES OF THE PRAIRIE

THE SOIL which Lilli had broken to the plough two months previously was already covered with green when she arose one summer morning and ran, quick and light, to the garden, where her mother was already at work, although the pink smudges or dawn had not yet faded and the grass was still encased in silver dew. As Lilli's bare feet came into contact with it, she shivered slightly, a shiver of pleasure, for she loved the touch of it – it made her feel fresh and young. A red bandana which she had knotted about her blue denim trousers flew free when she ran.

The kitchen garden was Zenobia's domain. Vegetables, flowers, poppies, sunflowers, herbs – all were laid out in symmetrical rows, or in the case of flowers, in beds arranged to imitate Bukovynian embroideries. Early in the morning, Zenobia hurried out wearing a shawl knotted at the back of her head, a shirt made of flour sacks, with a bit of embroidery at the neck and shoulder, and a skirt of black wool stuff draped triangular fashion to her waist. Once in the garden, she knelt among the rows as some kneel in church, in a kind of earth worship.

On her way to the garden, Lilli paused to peer beneath a shrub where she had planted slips for her flower garden. Bending down, she examined the lady slipper she had hidden there so Zenobia should not find it. "That is an evil flower," she had told Lilli. "Never touch it. When you see it, walk around it." Could anything so rare and beautiful be evil? Like

a gold pouch inlaid with rubies, the plant was an alien, as exotic a growth as Lilli herself. Every day she came to pay homage to it as to royalty, noting the gradual unfolding of the bud, and pondering upon its exquisite form.

The flower garden was close to the house and Lilli stopped there to visit her favourite flowers. She had her own names for them: pansies she called Little Girls; sweetpeas were petticoats; wallflowers she named Sunshine, and susans were Black Brows. Everywhere, colour in small torches – zinnias stiff and starchy, nasturtiums with orange satin petals, dahlias like grand ladies in wine velvet gowns. Lilli snatched up a nasturtium flower and took it into her mouth to suck the nectar.

As she came into the kitchen garden, a bee alighted upon her head. Zenobia looked up, beads of perspiration on her lip, her face grey with exertion.

"Lilli!" she exclaimed, getting up from her knees.

"What is it, mother?" asked Lilli, oblivious of her strange ornament. She took up a hoe and considered where she should start working.

"A bee on your head."

"A bee?" Lilli, unafraid, stood laughing in the sunshine, with the bee caught like a golden ornament in the brown net of her hair. "A bee? Ha, ha!" Lilli put her hands to her hair. "It thinks I'm a flower!" The bee circled round Lilli's head, as though tracing a diadem, and then flew off. Zenobia stood staring after it, incredulous. What did this portend? She recalled the old folk saying that a person on whose head a bee alighted was destined for a strange fate. Why was the girl laughing in that gypsy way? Lilli, excited by the beauty of the thing, ran to her mother and flinging herself upon her, kissed her. A look of distaste appeared on Zenobia's face. She rubbed the moist spot on her cheek with her hand, as though it were something obscene. "Faugh!" she exclaimed in disgust. "That is shameful, to kiss like a baby." She did not like

physical contact with this daughter of hers; Lilli was too alien, too secretive in her personal life to be congenial. Lilli backed off, conscious that she had erred, that her feelings of affection were to be hidden and pushed out of sight like something disgraceful. She attacked a hill of potatoes.

As the two worked – Lilli with ambidextrous skill which made Zenobia's stolid movements appear graceless – Zenobia recalled the circumstances of Lilli's birth. The girl had been born at the twilight hour, and was clothed in a caul, for which reason Grandmother Yefrosynia had predicted that the child would have second sight. It was true that Lilli possessed many curious powers. Zenobia valued Lilli's assistance in planting; slips which the girl transplanted flourished, for she had the green thumb. When Lilli baked bread or made pickles, she always had success – the "lucky luckless one" her mother called her.

When the two had finished their work, it was near noon. Both were sweating, and the veins stood out on Lilli's hands like cords. Zenobia staggered to the bench by the house. "Bring some buttermilk from the cellar," she said to Lilli, "and something else for lunch. We'll eat here in the shade."

Lilli ran into the house and lit a candle which she placed on the floor in order to lift the lid to the cellar entrance. Here Zenobia kept sauerkraut, pickles, sour cream, ewe cheese, eggs, preserves, vegetables. Lilli stepped down the stairs and set the candle down on a stone crock, looking about with admiration at the yellow, red and green preserves glowing in their glass jars like jewels in the dim light of the candle, the smoked meats hanging down from the rafters and the wooden kegs of apple cider. Then she poured some buttermilk into a jug, selected a pickled lettuce, some cottage cheese and dills. These, along with a loaf of rye bread she took outside to her mother who was sitting now, fanning her face with her apron, as she rested on the *pryspa*, the wooden bench which ran all round the house. When they had finished their lunch, they

rested for a while, Zenobia chewing some salted sunflower seeds while she wriggled her toes in the earth. She had a mint leaf on her head and over it had tied a handkerchief.

The still prairie had come to life. A myriad tiny voices sounded from every blade of grass as though hundreds of insect musicians were playing their after-luncheon music. "Listen, mother!" exclaimed Lilli.

"I hear nothing," replied Zenobia, shrugging her shoulders as she felt the warmth seeping through her.

"Listen, listen!" implored Lilli. A leaf turned; it was like a musical note. A caterpillar plopped from a twig; a robin swished his rump briskly in a bowl of water.

Petey was near the creek, tumbling in a pile of hay. He stood up, took a stone and splashed it into the creek. The noise plunked musically and Petey shrieked with delight. A stray breeze lifted the wig of an elderly dandelion. Petey, enchanted, cried out, "Grandfather is losing his hair!" He sat down on the ground and one by one examined his toes, which he appeared to find most satisfactory. He scratched his back, yawned, stretched, put his toe in the water, and withdrew it when he found the water cold. Joy was in every motion. He looked into the creek, saw a frog, and stared at him as though hypnotized. What a wonderful huge world of discovery was the child's! And how the world shrinks in maturity, as everything becomes familiar and dulled! Petey chuckled, rushed, charged, bounced, ran around in circles, battled with an invisible foe. Finally, in ecstasy, he fell down flat on his face in the grass, laughing.

Lilli watched him with wonder. The joy and freedom of childhood had been denied her, and they were all the more delightful to her as she watched Petey, now sitting on the ground, drawing a picture in the dust. "Everything is new for Petey," she commented. "He is fresh as a bird come out of an egg."

"He is a *molodets* like his father," replied Zenobia,

thinking of the youth Anton had once been. A *molodets*, Lilli knew, was one who possessed audacity, courage, a zest for life. To be a *molodets* was to have a special quality in meeting life, a quality which Petey would always have, if he lived to be one hundred.

Zenobia took up a handful of brown earth and ran it through her fingers. She loved the earth and contact with it. There was a solid earthiness about her that Lilli appreciated. She had an unchanging quality; one could depend on her to carry out all the rituals connected with living.

"Tell me something of your life in the old land, mother," requested Lilli, feeling that this was a good time for the old stories which she loved.

Zenobia pondered, thinking back to her own girlhood, to find some basis of comparison. She began to talk, trying to describe to Lilli, born on the prairie, the world of the Carpathian Mountains. "You wouldn't know me, Lilli, if you had seen me as a girl – I was proud!" She sighed at the recollection. "Skin rosy and firm, eyes bright, high bosom, trim legs. On Sundays, when I put on my red woollen coat, richly embroidered linen blouse and two-piece skirt with golden-woven stripes, all the other girls stared with envy as we rode on our small mountain ponies to church – the old folks with their umbrellas, the young people adorned with beads, gold thread, ribbons, belts, shawls – what beautiful colours, like a picture! In the summertime I would put flowers in my hair – what fine hair I had, glossy and fine as silk – and decorate it with shiny ornaments clustered on both sides of my head. Then, proud as a peacock, I would walk along the mountain paths through fields of poppies and chrysanthemums and other blooms – a thousand colours, such as you never see on the prairies!" She paused as she regarded the flat prairie around her, then resumed, "The whole mountainside was as if on fire with flowers. Everywhere, medicinal herbs which women and girls gathered to cure ailments. As I walked, I

thought of tales which the old folks used to tell of mountain nymphs – how anyone who is caught in the forest and meets a nymph must give her a shawl or a piece of clothing, otherwise she will do him mischief. I remembered the travellers who used to come to visit us – yes, even in our village up in the mountains we had visitors – gypsies in velvet coats with silver buttons; traders who came to buy the heavy woollen greatcoats we made for the fairs; saffron merchants who arrived in the autumn and sold us caraway seeds – and above all, the *olyikari*, oil merchants – the women used to buy love philtres from them. One of them told my fortune, said I would travel to a distant country and live on a great piece of land – that story has certainly come true."

Lilli, during this narration, had her eyes fixed with curiosity on her mother. It was a revelation to her that beneath the placid exterior, her mother could have nourished this recollection of her youth which now sparked out in poesy. It was always difficult to imagine a woman as she had been before she had borne her children, for she was much more attached to them than was the father, and they were more a part of her life. "It must have been very different from the prairie, mother," she commented as she tried to conjure up a picture of the old country.

"So different, Lilli, it's hard to tell you," replied her mother. "That mountain river, so fierce it seemed to boil, but the water was as cold as ice. Sometimes I stood on the banks and watched the timber rafts come down the stream and called out to the young men. . . ."

"You did this when you were a girl, mother?" queried Lilli, as she tried to convert her present mother into the high-spirited mountain lass.

"Yes, I did," affirmed her mother and there was a softness and slyness on her face which Lilli had not seen before. She continued, "As I walked, I looked up at the clouds, always changing, steaming like vapour above the Black Mountain, the

air clear as tears! And from the distance would come the sound of the flute played by some shepherd lad as he sat in a meadow of glorious flowers watching over his flock. How bright was the Paschal Night with its thousand candles lit like stars against the black mountain side! You cannot think, Lilli, how splendid it was to watch the thunder clouds ride on the wings of a storm, above the black heights of the mountains!"

Where had that girl gone, thought Zenobia, as the scenes faded from her mind, and with a sigh she found herself beside this strange girl who was her daughter, and yet not her daughter. Was this what she was preparing for when she had danced with that handsome, dark-haired youth named Anton Landash, and he had spoken of Canada, where one might acquire a great estate like one of the Austrian nobles?

Lilli wondered at this untold chapter of her parents' history. How had her father, so adventurous a person, married a woman placid and resigned as her mother? Without thinking, she blurted out, "Mother, how did you come to marry father?"

Zenobia reddened unbecomingly, since she did not confide easily. How had Lilli divined what she had been thinking? She shot a suspicious glance at the girl, but Lilli's face was impassive. How could she explain herself as she used to be, draw for Lilli the portrait of the girl she had been? She knew only too well what she had become, how the flesh had betrayed the spirit of that exuberant girl. Nevertheless, she decided to tell Lilli the truth: "Your father married me because I had a new pair of yellow boots."

A pair of yellow boots! Zenobia saw them now, as they appeared to her delighted eyes when her father had presented them to her to wear to a dance in a neighbouring village. "Yes, a pair of yellow boots," she continued defiantly. "Oh, they were of the finest leather, soft as a stocking, tall as my knee, yellow as gold. . . . They were made by my father; he was an artist – people came from miles around to have him make

boots for them, but nobody had yellow boots like mine!" She spoke with passion, feeling that perhaps as long as she had the yellow boots, she would not lose contact with the girl she had once been. "Girls nowadays speak of freedom," she went on with a touch of spite, for she was opposed to the talk of young people concerning the new ways, "but the mountain lasses had freedom then! Freedom to walk, as I walked, twenty miles to that village, to be at the dance, and those yellow boots of mine attracted many eyes, I can tell you! Bounding, leaping, whirling, they sang out as I stamped and glided about the room, and seemed to say, 'Look at my new boots! Look at my boots!' Who could resist such boots? And then" – Zenobia sucked in her breath at the memory of it – "then my boots caught the eye of Anton Landash, a handsome young man of the district – " She stopped, and did not appear willing to continue. "What happened then?" Lilli was jumping with excitement. Zenobia bridled: "He came to me, seized my wrist and whirled me off – my yellow shoes dancing all the while.... It was the beginning of our courtship, for we were married six weeks later. Yes, Lilli, when I put on those yellow boots, I never dreamed how far they would take me. . . ." Her voice faltered to a whisper.

"A pair of yellow boots!" breathed Lilli. What things of beauty! They appeared to her like a magic talisman in a fairy tale. How long would those boots dance, thought Lilli, feeling that they were symbolical of peasant craftsmanship. All those old things – which she felt belonged to her somehow – were passing, relegated now to the obscurity of an immigrant's trunk. Her mother, that sombre peasant, must have felt this special quality in Lilli, for her daughter's appreciation of the old beauties was the one point of intimacy between them. She was pleased now when Lilli inquired, "Were those the boots which you have in your trunk, mother?"

"Yes," replied Zenobia with a sigh. She stopped as her eyes fell upon the cracked skin of her hands. It was as if the

sight had brought her back to her present status. "You live life not as you want to," she commented, "but as you must. Yes, in youth you think you'll fashion life as you wish, and wear it like a golden garment, but in age when you look at this garment, you see it's made of a sack all covered with patches."

Zenobia loved these peasant saws, such as, "Truth is a thorn, it pricks from all sides;" or, "Sprinkle a pig with holy water, and a pig remains a pig." For her, they embodied the harsh truth of peasant experience. "Anything that blooms true from peasant seed must live," she was fond of saying. At the moment, she might have lapsed into moroseness if she had not spied Petey, trying to clamber upon the back of a black and white calf, engaging the slippery sides with a stubbornness which did not doubt his ultimate victory. "Did you ever see such a child!" she exclaimed fondly, and all her regrets for her girlhood vanished.

"Do you remember when I bought Blackie from you for two cents, mother?" asked Lilli. It was only a short while ago that Blackie had been sick, and according to an old custom Lilli, as a member of the family, had purchased the calf from her mother, in the belief that this transaction would help the animal recover. "From that day," recalled Zenobia, "Blackie began to thrive." Lilli laughed: "He's Petey's now, mother . . . I sold him again for two cents, no profit. . . ." Her mother replied: "Petey is early getting into business."

Lilli inhaled deeply the scent of prairie grass, and it made her long to get away by herself in the country. "The berries are ripening, mother," she suggested. "Just right for picking. . . ." "Your father likes berry dumplings," considered Zenobia. "Yes, we could have some for supper. Take Petey with you." She added as an afterthought. "And pick some wormwood – I must have some to make a brew. A little of it, in whiskey, is the best medicine for stomach trouble . . . that way, you hide the bitter taste."

The prairie flowers were thick around the berry patch,

which nobody had yet discovered. Before Lilli began to work, she sat Petey down in the shade and gave him a rhubarb leaf for a fan. All the affection pent up in Lilli's heart was lavished upon her small brother Petey, with whom she had a closer bond than any other member of the family. As he grew, she devised many amusements for him. She wove wreaths of flowers for him. Red was Petey's favourite colour, and she had made him a red wool jacket and cap, trimmed with gold buttons. He was fond of this outfit, and would not consent to go for a walk unless he were wearing it. "He looks like a little king," said Anton, pleased with the appearance of his son.

Petey early displayed the quality of curiosity concerning his surroundings. He followed Lilli about making royal demands upon her, and she endured his tyranny lovingly. He would not permit any one else's ministrations and if Zenobia attempted to perform some service which Lilli was accustomed to do for him, he flew into a rage and demanded, "Liliana!" He thrust his hands into the sleeves of his jacket and stood like a miniature Buddha, awaiting Lilli.

She devised for the little boy many song-pictures in which she described people, things, tastes, sounds. He liked songs with onomatopoeic sounds, or songs describing colours and tastes. Lilli instructed her little brother how to put his ear to the telegraph pole so that he could hear the singing of the wind through the wires; she made a flute and played for him, or blew through a grass stem. Together, they watched the ripples of light and shadow pass over a field of oats; they saw the dance of clouds before rain, they felt the satin texture of flower petals. Petey was a thoughtful child, given to large reflections and deep ponderings. His was not a passive nature – he rushed at life, grasping with eager hands. He pulled up handfuls of flowers which he sniffed with moist, loud sniffs. His favourite expression was, "What is this?" and his reaction to the external world of sensation was one of continual discovery.

Lilli now turned to him, as he sat languidly fanning

himself, listening to the plunk of berries as they dropped into the pail. "Look, Petey, a gramophone flower." Lilli picked a wild morning glory and showed him how its shape resembled the huge horn of their gramophone.

"Will it make music?" Petey stretched his hand out.

"If you sing into it," replied Lilli, and she hummed with her mouth close to the trumpet.

As Petey grew sleepy beneath the summer sun, his limbs relaxed and vagrant bubbles came from his mouth. Drowsily he heard the murmur of Lilli's voice as she related the wonders of sleep. Sleek was a beautiful fabled land. There from a tree grew golden apples; birds with golden wings flew in the air; the scent of petals dropping from flowers was languorous upon the mind of the sleeping child. Clouds, rose-tinted, grazed peaceably in the wide meadows of the sky. The goddess of summer, clad in coral muslin, walked gracefully through the land, scattering gems from her rosy fingers.

While Petey slept, Lilli sang a lullaby, composing the words and tune simultaneously:

> Sleep, little one, sleep, brother mine, God give thee joy, my little apple! I will give thee a sugar lump, I will give thee a cup of milk. Thou wilt have a cake of honey and rye. Thou wilt ride upon a sheep, thou wilt run over the prairie, and flowers will bloom in thy steps. Sleep, little brother, for the dream man comes with his bag past the window. He will bring thee a pink and gold dream, he will wrap thee in a blanket of sleep.

She stretched out beside the boy and watched the clouds overhead. It began then, the music which haunted her, a tune which she had never heard played or sung. It came out of the air and followed her. Each time a shadow passed the trees, it was like a note. Leaves rustled, animals ran through the bush, birds flew by, a partridge exploded from the underbrush. Lilli realized that this was the raw material of music. Flowers opened, the dew fell off; bees glittered in the sunshine, the

wind blew the underside of a leaf, the whole world was speaking with her. Rhythm was felt in the swaying and bowing of trees to each other. The leaves turned, half silver, half green on the silver maple. The quickly moving clouds of the Manitoba sky made her want to sing. She could hear music at a distance, as if a violin or pitched voice, but she could never reproduce the tune.

It was sounds which intrigued her, the infinite variations of sound in nature. The wind whispered through pine needles as if hissing through its teeth. The wind as it struck the large, coarse leaves of the poplars jiggled the round, flat discs and set up a clatter like raindrops in a tin pan. The long, thin leaves of the willow had a quick, light sound like the scraping of a bow across the strings of a fiddle. Every sound of nature was music to her ears, the chords through telegraph wires, the wind through wheat, the song of the meadowlark as it arose from the ground, the whirring and beating of wings, the horns, throbs and whistles of prairie songsters.

They inspired her to song, and this song was in imitation of the distant music which she heard, but could not capture. It remained always just beyond her, calling her, arousing her to wonder and mystery. So insistent was the melody that Lilli sometimes walked for hours in pursuit of it, led on and on, and hearing everywhere the song of enchantment. Yet it always eluded her, and vanished in the end, leaving her dissatisfied and wondering.

3
THE HARVESTERS

IF THE songs of summer had enchanted Lilli on her prairie walks, then the voices of the wind in the fall were even more compelling. Lilli, brown and wiry after a summer in the fields, lay on a haystack, her bare feet stretched out, and watched the swiftly-moving clouds of a Manitoba autumn day. "Gold, gold!" she murmured. The land was relaxed like a mother after childbirth. Lilli, too, felt a voluptuous yielding in her limbs as the sun caressed them with its golden film.

At this moment, Anton appeared on the doorstep of the house, dressed for town in his fawn gabardine trench coat, felt hat and camera slung over his shoulders. He was an amateur photographer, developing his own prints in a dark room which he had set up for the purpose. Birds, rare plants, fields of wheat – these were his favourite subjects. Full of confidence and some vanity, he squared his shoulders as he reviewed the business he had to transact in town.

A few weeks back an itinerant photographer had stopped off at the Landash farm, and Anton consented to have a photograph made of the entire family. Accordingly, after a family consultation, it was decided that the family should sit around a table, and all engage in some cultural activity to show themselves off to the best advantage. The table was spread with flowers, artificial and real, and at the head sat Anton, his dictionary before him, as though in the midst of study. Beside him, on either side, sat Zenobia and Fialka, with needlework in their hands, and then Petey, his blond hair in a curl like a

question mark, blowing into a tin horn, Masha and Tasha with half-sized violins tucked under their chins, and all the other children with books or musical instruments, except Lilli, who was not deemed to have musical or scholastic talent. By the time she had finished disposing the children around the table and supervising their activities, Lilli had little time to provide herself with something to do, so that when the photograph was taken, she was caught unawares with her hands clutching the table, and mouth wide open.

When the photograph came, some time after, all the children rushed to their father to see it, crowding about him with exclamations:

"Look at Petey's curl!"

"And the violins!"

"And the books!"

"And the flowers! Like real!"

"And look at Lilli! Ha, ha, ha!"

As each one seized the photograph, he burst into laughter, for Lilli appeared like a dark blotch, with her mouth gaping and her hands, huge, grotesque, upon the table.

"Give that to me, I'll fix it," said her father, and he took up a pair of scissors to cut Lilli out of the picture. He was proud of his good-looking family, and did not wish to acknowledge this gnome.

"But you are cutting me off, Father," cried out Lilli heartbroken. "I'm part of the family, too, let me be there."

Anton, as though he had not heard, took up the scissors and snipped off the end where Lilli sat, and as the tiny piece fell to the ground it was not noticed by anyone except Lilli.

Apart from all the others, in her hand the bit of paper Anton had cut off, stood Lilli, thinking that never could she re-unite that scrap to the photograph, that always she would stand on the outside of the family circle, trying to get in, yearning to share their joy. . . .

While Anton was getting out the horse and wagon, Lilli,

seized by a desperate resolve, slid down the haystack and ran into the house. How could she dream that he would take her with him – the least favourite one, she chided herself as she scrubbed her face till it shone like an apple. He would never ask her, she told herself brushing her hair like mad. But if he did? If he did? Her mind countered as she clambered into the new plaid pantaloons which her mother had made for her, and then scrutinized her bare toes to see if they were clean. She came out of the house and stood on the doorstep, not daring to express her wish to accompany Anton, but putting her desire so forcefully into her eyes that he must surely notice it.

"You like to come to town with me, Lilli?" he asked her on a sudden generous impulse, his peasant dislike for the unlucky one dissipated at the sight of this so eager, so shining girl. Then, too, he had a feeling of guilt regarding the incident of the photo, for he had seen the girl standing apart.

"Oh yes, father!" exclaimed Lilli. "Oh, I like to go." She rushed out to the wagon before he could change his mind and scrambled into the front seat beside her father, thinking how the other children would envy her. A person who had been to town always came back laden with news, mail and gossip.

As they passed a neighbour's fields, which contained wheat not yet harvested, Anton stopped the horses and sat for a moment looking at the fields. "Listen, Lilli," he said. They were still as waves of sound came from the tossing and shuddering of the heavy wheat ears; the slightest tremble of wind magnified the silken rubbing of ear upon ear. "Sh-sh-sh," whispered Lilli, trying to imitate the sound. "Do you think it sings any different than our wheat?" he asked her with a smile. The autumn wind seemed to sing in four-part harmony, rising now from one direction, then another voice joining in, and so on, until the four winds were all singing together. "I must see that wheat," said Anton. He threw down the reins, leaped out of the wagon, and strode into the fields, returning almost at once with a handful of kernels. "See, Lilli?" He showed her

the wheat as he got in again. "This is a new wheat which Karmaliuk got from the city. I'm going to write to the Government for wheat seed like this."

He took out a box with several compartments, and placed the Karmaliuk specimen within. "I don't think this is as good as the wheat which I grew in our garden from my own seed," he went on. "Look in this box, Lilli. I grew this from wheat which I brought, long ago, from the old country. These seeds were immigrants like myself." The simile pleased Anton, and he repeated it. "Yes, seeds, too, can be immigrants." He poured the grain from one hand to another, recalling those kerchief-wrapped seed bundles which the Bukovynian immigrants had brought with them to Canada, along with the rest of their worldly goods. Lilli took the seed in her hand and rolled it between her fingers. In those hard, red little bodies was contained the magic of life, the power which would one day cause them to shoot up and grow in gold-crested waves under Canadian skies.

"Some day our farm will look like that," Anton pointed with his whip to the farm of Jensen the Swede, where stood a white house with green gables and a modern barn. Jensen was one of the wealthiest farmers in the district; he had been farming since the turn of the century.

"That kind of farming," said Anton, "is done, not by scratching the earth, as our people do; it is brought about by science."

"Science – what is that, father?" asked Lilli. The word was new to her.

"Science," deliberated Anton, "is to know how to do things with learning and skill, to be of the new country, not of the old. Science is to live in the light and not in the dark."

What a fertile mind her father had, thought Lilli! How everything came to life as she listened to him – the earth, the fields of wheat, each plant! He knew their properties as a peasant knows them, and now he was reaching out to another

kind of knowledge which came out of books, no less.

As the wagon passed the swamp, Lilli's eyes darted from side to side. The life of the swamp excited her – the sounds and motions of the wild life within, its swarms of insects and birds, the willows bending over the edge, the long grasses bordering it, the cat-tails, rushes and big-leaved swamp docks growing in it. Above them, the clouds drifted like tufty white polka dots on blue calico. Anton, too, found the life in the swamp worthy of study. "Everywhere," he said, "you can see stories. There is hardly a plant, a bird, even a rock which does not have its story. Look there – " His sharp eyes had discovered something, and he stopped the horses and got off. "Jump off, Lilli," he said. "I want to teach you a lesson in science. Today we are two scientists, yes?" He held out his hand and helped her down.

"See this?" He picked up a stone lying by the road, and scratching at its surface, showed her the pattern of a fern leaf on its surface. "This was once a real leaf, Lilli, which was buried in the earth and became a stone." Lilli ran her finger over the inlaid pattern. "Who told you that, Father?" she asked. "I heard it from Mr. Mac," replied Anton. "This is called a fossil." Anton had some difficulty with the word, which he pronounced "possil," since the letter "f" was not common in his language.

They got back into the wagon, carrying the stone. "Oh, how beautiful the prairie today, father!" exclaimed Lilli, stirred by the sight of all those harvest fields, with threshers busy everywhere, the chaff flying about, the vast perspective due to the clear air of autumn, the neighbours calling out as they passed, the women in their draped Bukovynian skirts and coloured shawls standing in the fields, the children by the roadside with handfuls of autumn flowers, the dark red elevators piercing the Canadian skies.

"Yes, the new country is far better than the old," agreed Anton, "for all your mother's stories. . . . I could tell you how

our people suffered in the old country." His face became hard with the memory. "On Sunday morning," he related, "when church bells were ringing, and all good people were riding off to church, the servant of the baron came with a big whip to chase me to work: 'Get up and herd the oxen,' and go I must, for people had no choice but to work on Sundays as on every other day." Anton's voice had a bitter edge, bitter with wrongs suffered. "I was seventeen years old then, a hardy lad without fear. . . ." And without affection, he might have added, for the children of the mountaineers grew up early in the pitiless struggle for existence. He continued, "Well, I worked a whole week herding cattle all day, with no chance to wash my face or to go to sleep. . . . In the morning I arose and without breakfast, without shoes, I left for work. The snow was falling, my feet were freezing. . . . It was like lifting two lumps of ice to walk. . . ." So realistic was his narrative that Lilli shuddered, although the autumn sun was warm on their shoulders. Anton went on: "When I came back, I was so tired that I fell upon the doorstep of the baron . . . and the cook called out, 'Here's a drunk lad, let's beat him up to teach him a lesson!' So they brought in the servant again and with his great leather whip he gave me the payment for my week's labour – twenty lashes on my bare back. . . ." He turned to Lilli, and for once Lilli caught a glimpse of the circumstances which had moulded his harsh character. "And thus was spent my boyhood, Lilli – and that of all our young men." Lilli frowned. "How could you endure such a life, father?" she asked. Anton shrugged as he replied with a folk proverb: "They hanged a gypsy – he kicked for a while, and then got used to it." Still, he conceded, as he recalled other incidents of his youth, "We had many free, happy days, and especially when I went as a sheepherder along with other shepherds to the mountain downs. . . . In the evenings, we took our meals about the bonfire, the mountains standing up around us, clouds about their heads. . . . We sang and told stories, and about us, the shooting stars, like rain, fell

from the heavens. In the fall, there was dancing about the bonfire. We'd take our scarlet capes and move in a long line about the fire, always dancing, leaping, stamping – thus we kept ourselves warm."

How, wondered Lilli, had the news come to them of the new country? She asked: "How did you hear about Canada, father?" He laughed as he replied: "Men came, agents, I know not what, all dressed up in fine clothes, and told us a story as we sat around in a cafe drinking tea. What stories!" Anton threw back his head and guffawed. "Sausages grew on trees, all the women had silk hose, push a button and you get everything you want. . . . And we sat, open-mouthed, drinking it all in. Could this be true, we asked each other? Canada, what a country!"

Landash's laughter had a free, robust quality; his sense of humour was coarse but exuberant. Once he started to laugh, he infected all his hearers, and Lilli, certainly, could not resist; they both laughed, and there was a similarity in their laughter, Lilli's being like a junior echo of her father's. Anton's mood of laughing was generally followed by a spell of singing. He boasted he could sing three or four days and never twice one song. One of his favourites, which he sang now, concerned the life of a Carpathian mountain outlaw. He was none of your passive performers; rather, he brought vigour and action to his role; he swayed his shoulders, pounded his feet, tossed his head, so that the song of the outlaws, as it rang over the Manitoba wheatfields, was not only something to hear, but to see – as though the Canadian farmer had suddenly been transformed into a mountain brigand:

Hai, brother outlaws, fill the cup and pass it around! Heap more wood upon the campfire. Let the song burst from our throats as our musician plays softly upon his pipe. Hidden in the bush beneath the green pine trees, even devils could not find us here. As the sky is for the birds, so for us are the caves, our retreat in these Carpathian crests. We sleep till the stars

light the skies with their lamps, and then we emerge by stealth. Rejoice, brothers mine, for each day that is ours, since a life such as ours can't last long. With the first fall of snow, our heads will hang down like flowers, no more shall be heard our glad song.

The wagon bounced and jiggled its great five-foot wheels, as though in eager rhythm, Anton sang and cracked his whip at the end of every line, calling, "Hai, hai," drawing out the "ee" as was the custom of wagoners to the curl of their whips, and the girl beside him echoed "Hai, hai!" Then, song finished, Anton reached into the back of his wagon for a sack of musk melons and split one with his knife. The melon cracked open with a popping smack, revealing a bright peach-coloured interior lined with rows of seeds. "These are better in the old country," he commented as he cut the melon into slices and gave one to Lilli. The juice trickled out of their mouths as they ate with not too much delicacy. "Save the seed, Lilli, I want to give it to Jensen." They took the pips out of their mouths one by one and carefully put them away in a paper bag. "The seed which grew this melon came from the old country," said Anton between bites. "Yes, Lilli," he went on, "the great grandfather of this melon – how many great's, I can't count – was a Bukovynian melon."

As she ate, Lilli thought of that granddaddy of all these melons, basking in the sun, accumulating all those warm juices, growing plump and succulent under Bukovynian skies, little dreaming that his descendants would multiply so profusely over Canadian prairies. "I'll bet that great grandaddy never thought that his grandchildren would grow on Canadian prairies," she chuckled. She had seized half a melon and had plunged her face into it, so that only her big eyes stuck out, like beetle lamps above the rim. The sight and the remark struck Anton as so comical that he burst out laughing, and pieces of melon flew round about.

"Look, father, the village!" Lilli called out in joy. Two

rows of whitewashed houses ran in old country style on each side of the street, big-wheeled Bukovynian wagons were arriving, farmers in sheepskin coats or plaid mackinaws bustled in front of the general store, women thronged inside to purchase fall clothing. Even before Anton got off the wagon, people called out to him and approached him, since they had been waiting for him to write letters for them. "Go play with the children, Lilli," said Anton carelessly as he jumped off and went to join a group of farmers.

Lilli, left to her own resources, stood awkwardly looking at the other girls and boys. They were dressed differently than she was and stared at her clothes. She wanted to make friends with them, but she did not know how to go about it. Going to the store window, she peered in. What a wealth of things! Children were looking at the candy counter, admiring the striped sticks, licorice and toffee.

Lilli opened the door and walked in. The store smelled of mucilage, sawdust, leather jackets, calico, herring and pipe smoke. A crowd of people, Swedes and Bukovynians, Icelanders and Scots sat about or stood in groups. The women crowded about the counters, looking over bolts of calico for new dresses, sniffing the sweet, dusty smell of the cloth as it was ripped off the bolt by the clerk. The men discussed the harvest, grain prices, machinery, future plans. They were good to look at, these immigrants, their faces weatherbeaten by years of struggle on the wild prairie, with wrinkles like furrows ploughed in their faces by time. Some were poor farmers from sub-marginal farms, others owned substantial property, but already a similarity existed among them, the beginning of a national spirit.

Lilli gazed covertly at the other children. One Swedish boy was stiff in his new braces; a little Icelandic girl of twelve strutted about in a blue velveteen costume, very conscious of her good looks with her fair hair in curls. Somewhat apart stood a Finnish boy wearing a jacket too small for him, and

trousers from which his thin legs stuck out like sticks. He was whittling at a willow branch. For these children, the store appeared larger, more glittering, more crowded than it did to the adults, so full of sights that one might spend months examining them all.

"Look at the girl – " the Icelandic girl pointed Lilli out to the Swedish boy and they laughed. "She's wearing pants." The boy, who wanted to win the favour of the beauty, giggled nervously, encouraging the Icelandic girl to go up to Lilli and say, "I think you can't talk, ha, ha." One old lady disapproved of this display of girlish vanity and said, in a tone of rebuke: "The flower which blooms latest is sometimes the fairest."

Her remark, however, did not reassure Lilli, who backed away from the children and sought refuge in the crowd about the post-office, where a group of people were standing at the wicket to get their mail. They were opening envelopes, licking stamps, sending and receiving letters from far away. Most, as they turned from the wicket, carried big bundles of circulars, catalogues, parcels, letters from the old country and newspapers in various languages from the city press. Lilli stood at the end of the line, patiently waiting her turn. When she came to the wicket, she asked the postmistress, "Is there a letter for me?" She peered into the cage and saw an assortment of mail neatly arranged in pigeon holes. It was the first time she had ever seen how letters were distributed.

"What kind of letter, little girl?" the postmistress asked kindly. The rosy face of the Swedish woman bloomed like a pink dahlia above her blue gingham apron. So there were many kinds of letters! Lilli pondered what kind she would like to receive. Eagerly she peered over the top of the counter into the cage, scrutinizing the hundreds of letters within. "A letter from China," she whispered excitedly.

"From China!" exclaimed the postmistress and she bent forward to examine the girl through her thick spectacles. She had never seen this child before. "Yes, from China!" Lilli

spoke in a loud, firm voice. "A letter from China." She had made up her mind. A letter from that country would be something, indeed, to receive! To travel all that way over the top of the globe with its countries like coloured patches – red and green and yellow and blue, and finally arrive in a country where, she had heard, people walked on their heads. To hold in her hands such a letter, which had been written by a Chinese girl or boy and think of its contents – how would she hold it to read it – upside down? She could keep such a letter for a whole lifetime, yes, if such a letter had come to this post office, wouldn't she have the right to receive it, she who would treasure it more than anyone else?

Years of dealing with people in relation to letters had taught the postmistress wisdom. What was there in a letter – wishes, dreams, hopes, all human tragedy and comedy were contained in the mail. How did she know, when she handed over a piece of paper, what it might contain, how it might change the life of the recipient? So, she did not find ridiculous the request of the girl, for, after all, what was she asking? Simply for a touch of adventure, what each person, in his heart, really hopes for when he receives a letter.

So, in a kindly tone, she inquired, "What is your name, little girl?" Her eyes took in the plaid pantaloons, the shyness of the girl, the big pleading eyes.

Lilli replied, in a faraway voice, "Lilli Landash."

"I know your father," said the Swedish woman, bringing the girl back to reality. "He comes here often. We have a big bundle of mail for him. Wait, I'll see what there is for you, Lilli." She made a great display of hunting through the piles of letters. So many letters and parcels – surely there must be one for her! "I can't find your letter from China, Lilli," she said finally, "but here is something just come from the city, that I think you'll like. Maybe another time you'll get your letter from China." She held out a travel circular, full of coloured pictures.

"Oh thank you!" exclaimed Lilli. Heart beating rapidly, she went over to a cracker barrel and sat down on it to examine her mail. When unfolded, it became a big sheet, like a map, and on it were pictures of countries all over the globe. "See the World," the caption urged. Lilli spelled out the names one letter at a time, for she could not read very well. Here was China, indeed. Pagodas with roofs curved like wings were there, houses of a shape nobody in the village possessed, cherry blossoms, and a boy and girl dressed in flowered kimonos, not walking upside down at all. Chinese symbols in a row beside them, those were letters like the letters of the alphabet, though they looked more like pictures of tiny houses. Where was Bukovyna? Nowhere on that sheet could she find it, but here was Sweden, that was where Mr. Jensen came from. There he was now, a man of over sixty, his face all lean, hard angles under his sunburned blond hair. The Swedes no longer wore costumes in Canada, as the Bukovynians, because they had been longer in this country and had become more Canadian, more – with science, as Anton had expressed it. "See the World." Lilli repeated the phrase to herself as she tried to visualize how one would travel to those distant countries. How many days would it take to get to China if one set off in a horse and buggy? what language would the people speak? Their country must be strange and beautiful. In this store, reflected Lilli, were people from many countries, Sweden, Iceland, Bukovyna, Poland. If one were to hear all their stories, what a fine tale it would make! What the nature of their country was, how people dressed, what language they spoke, what songs they sang, what kind of children they had been, what dreams they had dreamed of in the new country.

The big, shaggy farmers in their speech still retained the rhythm and natural poesy of those who live by the soil, and Lilli, perched on her barrel, listening to their talk, absorbed those rhythms, felt how much of their daily struggle with the soil was revealed in those earthy words. They told stories, the

history of each piece of land, the epic of wheat, yarns of the old country, where they had come from, what it was like, how it was better here. The stories were punctuated by long silences, as if they felt they had time to spare, they were not rushed as people are in the city.

Lilli's father was now sitting at a small table writing and interpreting letters for the other Bukovynian farmers, official letters dealing with grain, taxes and voting. He had his spectacles on, more to impress his neighbours than to assist his eyesight, which was good. Lilli approached him now and held out the circular, saying, "Look, father, what I have – a letter from China." Anton pushed up his spectacles and laughed. "From China, ha, ha." He peered at her folder. "Listen to the girl making jokes." He pushed her away. "Go play with the children."

She went outside and approached a group of children. Standing a little distance away, she looked at them with longing, but said nothing. One of them, a thin, spiteful girl wearing a red dress, came over to her and stared, then burst out laughing. "Come and look at this girl – she's wearing green striped pants." The others came over and formed a circle about Lilli, ridiculing her clothes. One child, more insolent than the rest, ran at her and gave her a push. She staggered back a few paces, then recovered and tried to smile. "Hello," she said uncertainly. She wanted so much to be friends with them, to share the treasures of her letter and tell them so many things – about the grandfather melon, about the stone picture of the leaf, about the wheat seed. "I have a letter," she said diffidently, and held it out like a peace offering. One boy snatched it from her and tearing it to pieces, threw it down and stamped on it with big, noisy stamps. "Letter, ha," he shouted. "That's not a letter." The gang of children increased and became more aggressive, their faces hostile. Fear suddenly betrayed itself in her eyes and this was the signal for an attack. "Onion Eyes!" shouted one tormentor. He spat on her.

"Green Pants!" jeered another and he gave her a shove from the other side. "Snake Hands!" called a third. They began to dance about her, pulling at her clothes and jeering, while Lilli stood helplessly in the centre, looking from one to another with growing terror, trying to break through the circle, but stopped at each point by her tormentors. "Let me out!" she screamed, afraid of being trapped. The children laughed, enjoying the spectacle, sensing their power. A couple picked up clods of earth and threw them at her, laughing as they struck Lilli's face and throat. "Look how black she's getting," called out the Icelandic girl. "She never washes her face, I think." Her own white complexion contrasted with Lilli's tanned, mud-streaked skin. Lilli turned from one to another, imploring, and each greeted her with a jibe. She had a sticky feeling in her fingers, her stomach was tied in knots, her voice was thick with fear as she croaked, "Let me out!" Desperately she broke out of the circle, and ran down the road, pursued by her tormentors. Her mouth was dry inside and sweat poured down her face. She had never run so fast, and the children, seeing themselves outdistanced, one by one abandoned the chase. Lilli kept on running, kicking up the dust with her heels, her eyes stinging with the burning brilliance of the road, past the houses, past wagons, past the store, past people who turned to look and laugh at her, thinking this was some childish game they were witnessing, until at last she had left the village, and came to a haystack into which she dove head foremost, sobbing frantically. She lay hidden in the hay while people passed to and fro, wagons rumbled by, cows ambled down the road, tinkling their bells. What if her father had seen! He would never again take her to town! He would never sing and tell stories to her, instead, he would place her on a stool in a corner and make her peel potatoes all day, like the fool in the fairy tales. And if she had a blue velvet costume? Some day she would have! Her hair would all be in ringlets, and her skin, white as paper! She sat up and rubbed

her eyes, picked the hay off her clothes, spat on a hanky and cleaned her face. What was so disgraceful about pantaloons! They were made of good material, and one could run swiftly in them. Resolutely she got up, smoothed her pantaloons, patted her hair again, rubbed her face. She peered around the haystack. The children had disappeared. Head up, she marched down the road, thinking, she should have stayed, she should have fought – better to stand one's ground than run!

When she opened the door of the store, she found her father the centre of a circle of farmers, talking about his grain seed, which he had poured out of its box onto the table before him. All listened intently as he expounded his theory. "Seeds are immigrants, too. . . . " Anton was pleased, because he could see that he had made an impression on Jensen, the Swede. He had not noticed Lilli's discomfiture, and as she stood by him, touching his arm, he turned and said, "Well, is it you, Lilli?" Her face was composed, her hair slicked. "We'll have to go home now."

The ride home was glorious, Anton singing boisterously a rowdy song, "Who will take the widow home from the ball?" He was in rare good humour. "So – you enjoyed town?" he asked his daughter. "Oh, yes," agreed Lilli with enthusiasm. Forgotten, her humiliation, forgotten the ridicule of the children, only the wonderful remained, the ride across the prairie, the sight of the men in the store, the travel poster with pictures of China.

As twilight came on, the whole countryside was lit up as one straw stack after another was fired, until the fields glowed for miles around. "That's Jensen! That's Karmaliuk's! That's Johannesen!" they exclaimed in turn, identifying the source of each fire. "It reminds me of the old country," said Anton, for so many peasant rites were connected with fire. The defeat which she had just endured seemed to make Lilli even more receptive to sensation, and she could not get enough of the marvellous spectacle. One thresher, still humming in the

fields, stood out in a huge black silhouette against the horizon. Occasionally the figures of harvesters could be seen scurrying in the dark. As the wagon moved across the prairies, Lilli was filled with a strange exultation, engendered by the rhythm of the harvesters, the throb of the threshing machines, the great torches of burning stacks, the shaggy figures of the immigrants in the store – all united to form in her mind the picture of a rite as ancient as the human race.

4
THE IMMIGRANT CAROLLERS

THERE WAS little enough left of that autumn glory on the December afternoon when Lilli snuggled on a pile of sheepskins near the window, scratching off the frost with her fingernail so that she could see outside. A light fall of snow whirled through the yard, covering the ground in sculptured contours. The flakes were large, sleepy, revolving in a kind of charmed trance, each shape, each motion, creating a fresh pattern in Lilli's mind, like a succession of musical notes. It was cosy to be within on this day before Christmas, to feel the heat of the great clay stove, to smell the cinnamon rolls as they came out of the oven, and to think about the transformation which each month brought to their prairie country. In the peasant dialect which these Carpathian mountaineers spoke, December was called *hruden*, the month when the earth turned to frozen clods – an appropriate name, thought Lilli. November, which had just passed, was the month of falling leaves, *lystopad* – and how stripped and bare was the Manitoba landscape at that time! One by one Lilli enumerated the months: January was *sichen*, when trees were cut down for firewood; February was *liutyi*, or the fierce month of winter gales, and March *berezen*, when the birch trees showed the first signs of budding. April was *kviten*, the month of blossoms – a lovely name. May was *traven*, the month of grass. Following spring, came the summer months: June was *cherven*, the red month, when fruits and berries ripened; July was *lypen*, when the linden tree bloomed; August was *serpen*,

the month of the sickle. September was *veresen*, the month of threshing grain, and October *zhovten*, when the leaves turned yellow. What lovely names! Each a picture! The poetic peasant fancy which had bestowed on each month its special quality pleased Lilli. She was even more pleased by the sight of Petey sitting beside her, his golden head bent over a Christmas card depicting an angel dressed in embroidered white smock, high leather boots, sheepskin cap and pale green wings. The makers of these cards, thinking properly that man had been created in the divine image, had endowed these heavenly beings with their own peasant accoutrements. "This angel looks like me," Petey concluded after long deliberation. "Except I have no wings." There was some dissatisfaction in his voice. "Little boys have no wings," explained Lilli, and the boy's face dropped. "But I'll show you how to make angel wings in the snow when we go out."

Zenobia at the kitchen table was busy making cabbage rolls filled with rice. These were very tiny, about the thickness of a finger, and two inches long. After washing the rice, she boiled it for twenty minutes and then fried it with onions, parsley, dried dill, salt and pepper, rolled it in cabbage leaves and baked it for two hours. "Have you ground the poppy seed for the *kutia* Lilli?" she inquired as she looked up from the work. *Kutia* was a ceremonial Christmas dish eaten in thanks for the grain harvest: it was made of boiled whole wheat sweetened with honey and flavoured with nuts and poppy seed ground to a paste. "Mix it well with the honey and wheat," directed Zenobia, "and add a pan of chopped nuts." Lilli got up from her seat by the window and began grinding the poppy seed in the grinder, eyed hungrily by the children, who had been fasting since the previous night. Nevertheless, their eyes shone with eagerness, for Holy Eve was approaching.

Zenobia believed that Lilli possessed fey powers – to make bread rise, to supervise the planting, to devise new designs; and although this belief increased her mother's feeling of alienation from Lilli, nevertheless the older woman always called upon

Lilli's help when there was a ceremonial cooking to be done, or pickling or sowing seed. Plants sown by Lilli grew and flourished; a batch of bread which she made always rose and had good flavour; jars of pickles which she put up always proved sound.

Now, in the midst of Christmas preparations, with odours of honey, cinnamon, spices and fresh bread around him, Petey was in ecstasy.

"If you keep on sniffing, Petey," warned Lilli, "your nose will turn into a corkscrew."

At this dreadful warning, Petey ran to the mirror to flatten out his nose, while the twins took advantage of the distraction to run their fingers over the syrupy backs of the cinnamon rolls and gouge out the nuts embedded in them.

"Now who will take the *koliada* to the widow Fermenyk?" asked Zenobia, for this gift of food, taken by tradition to the grandparents, she wished to send to a poor woman of the district, since in any case the grandparents were coming to dine.

"I'll go," Fialka offered hastily, as she yearned for a chance to wear her new white brushed-wool coat and scarlet beret. In addition, the road to the widow's house passed by the home of a certain young man in whom Fialka was interested. All the children admired her as she stood, happy and laughing, in the doorway, before setting off.

"All the boys will like Fialka in that white coat," observed Petey sagely as he watched her leave.

"How was Christmas in the old country, mother?" Lilli asked when she had prepared the *kutia* and placed it on the window sill to cool, the swollen grains of wheat bursting out of their skins like pearls out of an oyster, while the faint fragrance of poppy seed mingled with the amber stream of buckwheat honey. She loved listening to Zenobia's stories of life in that faraway land; it gave her a sense of continuity with the past, as if informing her where she had come from.

"Well," began Zenobia as she paused to collect her

memories. "On Christmas Eve the boys prepared costumes for the Bethlehem play. There was a Devil, angels, three wise men with crowns, shepherds, musicians, and so on – also a stable made of wood and paper to signify the birthplace of the Christ child." She began to mix the batch of honeyed waffles with which the Christmas supper would commence. "All this they take from house to house and perform a play, to show the first night of Christmas. The shepherds are shown watching the skies, the three wise men appear and the musicians play a joyous song for the child in the stable." She interrupted her narrative to move Petey's fingers from the batter, and then continued: "But the children – they have a time of it, I can tell you – the morning after Christmas, before sunrise, a bright bonfire is burning in the street before each house. The boys take straw from out the house and burn it outside the gate, spread the ashes in the shape of a cross, symbolizing the cross of Christ. The street is marked with black crosses in the white snow the length of the village. All boys and girls take turns jumping over the burning cross as it is thought this will ward off sickness for the coming year." Lilli, who had been following her mother's recital intently, remarked, "Some boys and girls in the village here jump over fires, mother. . . ." She exchanged a look of conspiracy with Petey: "We'll make a fire, too, after Christmas."

The door opened abruptly and Anton came in from town, where business had called him. His coat was encrusted with snow, which smelled frostily as it came in contact with the steaming air from the oven. "You are a snowman, father!" exclaimed Petey, pulling at Anton's coat so that the snowflakes fell off in a shower upon the kitchen floor.

"A company of immigrants arrived in the district today," Anton announced as he took off his tall fur cap and shook it.

"Who are they?" queried Zenobia, spreading the coat on a chair before the stove to dry.

"Three big fellows to take up homesteads." Anton stamped

his high leather boots, clapped his hands together and went over to inspect the fuel bin. "I'll have to fill this soon."

"From where do these immigrants come?" persisted Zenobia. She had a natural curiosity about people and was forever asking questions concerning origins, ages, deaths and marriages.

"From the old country," replied Anton. "I interpreted for them at the station." He added, as an afterthought, "They will be here tonight to sing carols."

"Good!" exclaimed Zenobia with satisfaction. "To welcome strangers on Christmas Eve is the same as welcoming Christ." She hurried to check on her supply of apple cider, buckwheat gruel and pumpkin seeds, traditional fare for carollers. "Married?" she asked as she brought out a cask of cider.

"They brought no women with them," replied Anton. "Perhaps they can take one of the girls in our district." He yawned as the heat from the stove made him sleepy. He removed his boots to the floor.

Immigrants! From a strange country! From a distant land! Lilli, as she darted about the house to make sure that everything was in order, teemed with questions. What kind of immigrants? Were they perhaps something like the Three Wise Men? It was surely significant that they had arrived exactly on Christmas Eve. Like her mother, she was concerned with appearances, and bustled about, lighting candles before the holy pictures, getting out fresh linen, and inspecting the dumplings on the stove. They looked, she thought, like mother-of-pearl, with their filling of cherries and plums glowing rosy through their nacreous coats.

Petey, trailing after Anton and imitating his every action, tugged at his father's coat: "Father, will our cows talk tonight?"

Anton looked down with indulgence at the red-cheeked boy and chucked his chin. "Yes, Petey, they will. They are permitted to talk on Christmas Eve because they kept the little

Christ warm with their breaths when they lay in the straw." He took up his coat again. "Do you want to come to the stable with me?"

"Yes, oh yes!" shouted Petey. He scurried about, trying to get dressed, stumbling in his anxiety, tangling himself in his clothes, and finally in despair ran to Lilli. "Put on my coat, Lilli." His short fat legs beat an impatient tattoo as Lilli pulled on his coat, cap and mittens.

Together, they followed Anton outside, Petey wearing a sheepskin cap exactly like his father's, only smaller, and a pair of tall red leather boots. Lilli had wrapped a flowered woollen shawl about her head. Outdoors, the snow had stopped falling, the trees were laden with diamond dust, sleighs were dashing by with bells jingling, the skies were blazing blue. The intensity of the white snow blinded their eyes momentarily, and all three stopped, blinking until their eyes had become accustomed to the glare. The air, too, had a crust of frostiness like the icing on a cake, and Petey gulped it down in big gulps, licking his lips and explaining to Lilli, "I like to eat the air. It makes me feel good inside." As they walked into the snow, Lilli showed Petey how to fall into it to make angels by waving his arms against the soft, fine stuff. The puppy, who was with them, dove in and out and swam around as if in water, his black eyes gleaming like buttons.

Anton made the round of the household, following the direction of the sun. "Are you content?" he asked each cow, ox and calf as he fed it, for it was believed that cattle acquired speech on Christmas Eve, and could speak of the past, present and future. Each animal was given special food, sweet clover for the horse, something green for the cows, so they would know Christmas had come.

Lilli held out a dish to summon evil spirits, wolves, winds and storms to share their supper, and thus to protect them against evil influences in the coming year of soil cultivation. Behind her trailed Petey, puffing and red in the face, anxious to

be of service. "Frost, frost, come to dine with us, but do not freeze our grain," he called out. As the two stood with faces upraised, Lilli experienced a strange feeling: would the spirits of the winds and storms really hear her? She felt a stirring of the air as if her cheek had been lightly brushed, and she trembled. The wind stirred the snow up around her so that it touched her body in a light whirl.

Meanwhile Anton had piled a bundle of rye straw and fragrant hay on a sled and directed Lilli, "You bring in the sheaf with Petey." This sheaf was called Old Man, and was placed in an honorary corner behind the table under the holy pictures, to symbolize God's gift of a bountiful harvest. There it would remain until New Year's Day, to invoke the blessing of the spirits which were thought in olden days to haunt the grain fields.

When they returned to the house, Zenobia and Lilli set the table for dinner, which commenced traditionally with the appearance of the first star in the sky. First, Zenobia spread a white cloth over hay and as a centrepiece she placed a *kolach*, the white Christmas bread, flanked by two loaves of dark bread. There were twelve dishes, one for each Apostle – beet soup, honeyed waffles, stuffed dumplings, fish jelly, cabbage rolls stuffed with rice, fish fried in oil, fruit compote, poppy seed buns, honey and wheat mixture, braided bread, apple turnovers, prunes, and a drink made from the juice of boiled dried fruits. All had been laid out on the table in decorated dishes and wooden bowls. One large wax candle was lit on the table to symbolize the Star of the East.

Lilli went over to the wooden chest and began to take out their holiday attire – new ribbons, kerchiefs, woven belts and fresh white smocks. She caressed each garment, for she loved the feel of clean, starched linen and soft silk. "A belt, a red belt for me!" exclaimed Petey, prancing about in his white trousers and white shirt, his yellow hair slicked back. "You look like a buttercup, Petey!" exclaimed Lilli, hugging him.

When she had dressed her smaller brothers and sisters, tied their ribbons and combed their hair, she arranged them in a row on a bench to wait for dinner. She looked outside. The sky had darkened and now the first evening star was faintly visible far over the church. "I see it! I see the star!" she cried. A feeling of holy quietness came over her as she looked into the beauty of the night. In the distance, she could see the lights in other farm houses. Turning from the window, she contemplated the food, the candles, the *kolach* on the table and all these gave her the feeling that Christmas Eve had really begun. At this moment, her grandparents arrived, and supper was announced.

The children shouted for joy and all came to the big round table, which had been expanded for the occasion. Granny Yefrosynia and Grandfather Nestor were in the places of honour, the rest seated according to age. Faces around the table glistened rosy and bright; here Grandfather Nestor with long white hair and fluffy white whiskers; here Granny Yefrosynia like a russet apple in contrast to the tender baby faces of the smaller children, who, like cherubs, were all wearing their haloes that night; invisible wings sprouted on Petey's shoulders, for Christ was at supper with the family.

It was almost nine when bells were heard to jingle, the snow crunched beneath the sound of footsteps and voices rang clear in the outdoor frost. Faces appeared at the window, looking fantastic in the light of the kerosene lamp. Lilli cried out, "The carollers are here!"

A voice boomed from without, "Is it permitted to sing?"

"Sing, sing!" cried Anton unbuttoning the top of his vest, as the air was now very warm with the scent of candles, human breaths, hay, incense, food and pipe smoke. Lilli, followed by a swarm of children, ran to the window and placed a candle on the sill as sign of consent to the carollers. In the light of the candle, faces and shapes were seen – first of all three bearded strangers appeared, and behind them a throng of neighbours

pressed, their sheepskin coats familiar, but their faces transformed by the radiance of the night. Bowing low, the three strangers approached the house and soon the majestic strains of the first carol were heard: "Rise, O David, with your harp," in which not only men and angels were asked to join in the rejoicing, but also sun, moon, rain, fire, hail, wind, earth, rivers, serpents and wild animals, until all that breathe on earth echo the praises of the Christ Child:

The first to come is the bright Sun in Heaven,
The second guest is the Moon in the skies,
The third one to come is the small rain pattering.

Sacred thoughts filled Lilli's heart as she listened; she brooded deeply upon the meaning of this night. The three immigrants had invested the occasion with peculiar significance, as though they were important ambassadors who had travelled from a far country that very night. At the end of the first carol, Anton went to the door and flung it open. "Come in, come in," he invited the carollers. As the people crowded in, they brought a fragrance of snow, leather coats and sheepskin caps. There was much stamping of feet, shaking of coats and clapping of hands as they piled their sheepskins into a corner and seated themselves on the straw-covered benches. One by one they greeted Anton, "Good-evening, master of the house; set forth candles and three loaves of bread upon your table, for Jesus Christ is born in Bethlehem."

"God be with you," replied Anton.

Zenobia came forward to greet the guests, and close behind her came Lilli. She approached the tallest of the three carollers and bowed low. "May God give you health," she said. The man took her hand in courteous fashion and bowed.

Zenobia could not conceal her pleasure. "It is a good omen," she thought. "These three men are like the sun, moon and rain."

The neighbours whispered among themselves: "Who are

these men? They are not from hereabouts." The whisper went around: "Immigrants. From the old country. They have just arrived." Partly Canadianized themselves in manners and speech – most spoke a few words at least of English – they recognized in these strangers men who had not yet departed from the old ways, who still kept intact from foreign influence the native tongue and habit.

Divested of their sheepskins, their tall furry bonnets shaken free of snow, the immigrants sat down together on one bench, and as though of one accord, smiled.

"And how do you write yourselves, friends?" inquired Grandfather Nestor. He tried to subdue the curiosity of the children, who were staring openly at the foreign clothes of the immigrants and whispering.

"We are Matthew, Mark and John," replied the biggest of the three. An exclamation of delight arose from all. "Like the apostles!" They crowded in a circle about the three immigrants. One had the simple face of a child, with a halo of shaggy blond curls, shining red cheeks, slightly crooked smile and tilted nose. The second was a gentle giant, bearded, with strange violet blue eyes above his black beard. The third was scholarly in appearance, with white skin, pointed red beard and reddish hair, which hung low about his neck. He wore spectacles and had a signet ring on his long white hand. The clothing of the three men was cut European fashion, dark blouses with high necks, trousers tucked into high leather boots.

"Of what family are you?" asked Grandfather Nestor, when all had completed their inspection. "We are cousins, all of one name, and call ourselves Moroz," replied the dark one, who acted as spokesman for them. This surname, indicating Frost, aroused further quips: "Grandfather Frost has certainly come with his family to visit us on Christmas Eve."

Lilli looked hard at the red-headed man. His expression, as he regarded each person, was grave and tender, as though

he bestowed on him a kind of unspoken blessing. "He looks like Jesus," thought Lilli. The three men appeared to her deeper in thought, and expressed themselves more profoundly than the farmers in the district.

"How is it in the old country?" inquired Anton, when he had seen to it that all were comfortably seated.

"Bad," replied the giant. "The peasants are losing their land and moving into the cities," explained the red-headed immigrant. "The end is starvation or immigration," concluded the one with blond curls.

"What was your business in the old country?" inquired one of the neighbours. "Teacher, secretary, deacon," enumerated the giant, Matthew. "Aha!" Heads nodded. "You are scholars."

"Well!" laughed Anton, waving his hands as though to distant horizons. "You are welcome to settle here with us. Here is land for all. We need educated people. As you can see, we have few among us with book learning."

"Yes, yes, here is land for all," murmured the neighbours. Whispers circulated concerning their trunk: "A trunk, a whole trunk of books – could it really be possible? Anton saw it with his own eyes! There must be much wisdom in such books. And it is time for us to be wise!" Much satisfaction was felt by the homesteaders at the advent of the immigrants and their trunk of books; they felt that a new era of culture was now at hand.

Now the giant with gentle eyes, having heard Lilli's voice in the chorus, beckoned to her and suggested: "Let this little one sing for us. It is good to hear the voice of a young one on Christmas Eve."

Lilli, proud at being singled out, was about to comply, when she was prevented by her father. "Lilli has a low voice like a boy," he protested. "Let Fialka sing, high and sweet, as a girl should. Come, let us hear you, Fialka."

Fialka stepped forward and sang an odd little carol of

ancient origin:

The Saviour was born but He had neither babe clothes nor
bedding,
Halle-Hallelujah,
There was only straw, knee deep, on which to sleep,
Halle-Hallelujah.
The fish brought Him water, and the mermaids gave Him milk,
Halle-Hallelujah.

All laughed and clapped when she had finished, then called out that the three immigrants should sing once more.

Now the voice of the red-headed man, like the sound of a distant bell, was heard, and shortly the two others joined in like a carillon, each carrying a different tune, the first meanwhile singing monotonously and shrilly, the giant in deep, slow clangs, and the third in a strong baritone, as though they were bells summoning people to worship. Finally all three were chiming furiously, the bronze bass chimed lower and lower, the shrill tenor more and more piercing, and the baritone weaving an intricate pattern of melody. Then the neighbours joined in to swell the music to a mighty climax, until the house could hardly contain it.

Then Grandfather Nestor inquired, "Who will relate the birth of the Christ Child?" Without exception, all the guests looked to the three immigrants, thinking it fit that, since they had come tonight, this important function should be performed by one of them. With modest grace, John, the red-headed immigrant, offered: "If you will permit me, I will." The voice of the tenor began to relate the story of the Nativity, and it was to the simple hearts of the farmers present like the first night of Christmas:

All over the world there came the news
To Virgin Mary a Son was born.
On hay in the manger she laid the Son Of God.

Virgin Mary to God prayed, "In what should my Son be robed?"
O King of Heaven, send gifts through the master of the house.
Then came angels from Heaven to earth, bringing gifts,
Three candles of wax and robes of silk for the infant,
In Jordan River, where quiet the water stood,
O there the Virgin Mother of the Holy Infant bathed Him,
And when He was bathed, in robes of silk she robed Him,
And near the manger grey oxen stood,
On the Holy Infant their warm breaths they breathed.

Each phrase created a picture in the minds of the listeners, as if they stood in the real presence of the infant Christ, heard the song of angels, felt the warm breaths of oxen, and smelled the hay in the stable. The lines ploughed by harsh labour on their faces were obliterated and in their place were looks of gentle piety; memories of their squalid, monotonous life on the Canadian prairies were superseded by deep ancestral memories. Faces had become gentle, full of humility. Here and there, a tear glistened, rolled down a leathery cheek, and was flicked off with a finger. A sigh, an exclamation, a word of prayer came from moving lips. Lilli sat pensive, deeply moved by this story which she was hearing now in its primitive beauty for the first time. Each Christian present reviewed his life during the past year; all misunderstandings had to be cleared away; all broken friendships restored.

In the general conversation which ensued, the black-haired immigrant beckoned to Lilli, and drawing her to him, enquired, "What is your name?"

"Lilli."

He stroked her hair with his huge hand. "Lilia." He accented the name on the second syllable. "Lilia, little daughter, listen to me." He looked deep into her eyes, thinking, "This child has known sorrow." He enfolded her hand in his enormous one, and scrutinized her for a long while. "With your voice, you can express joy, sorrow. You can

give people ease of their pain. You can make real for them all that is in their hearts." When he had finished speaking, the two continued to gaze at each other, drawn together by a complete mutual understanding. Lilli's eyes glowed with rapture, and yet beneath it all, the big immigrant could sense her pensive mood. Presently he spoke: "The one who sings need never be lonely. Remember that, Lilia." He realized, from the tremor of her hand, how deeply he had touched her impressionable heart.

How did he know that she was lonely? Lilli slipped away from the crowd unnoticed. The carollers continued to sing and the sound was carried out of the house and far across the snow. The night was frosty and peaceful. Swarms of stars glittered jubilant in the dark blue sky. Lilli stood on the snow where the light streamed down like a banner and looked up. The stable was illumined by the light of the stars; sleighs dashed over the powdery snow; bells rang from the church. When she had looked deep into the giant's eyes, she had felt the sacred nature of song. Thus it must have been on the first night of Christmas. An intense longing and joy filled Lilli's heart. "Oh, I will never be lonely again!" she thought.

PART THREE
The Wreath Plaiting